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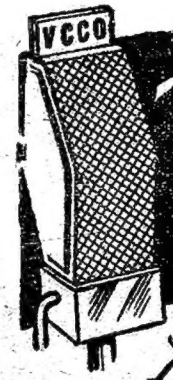

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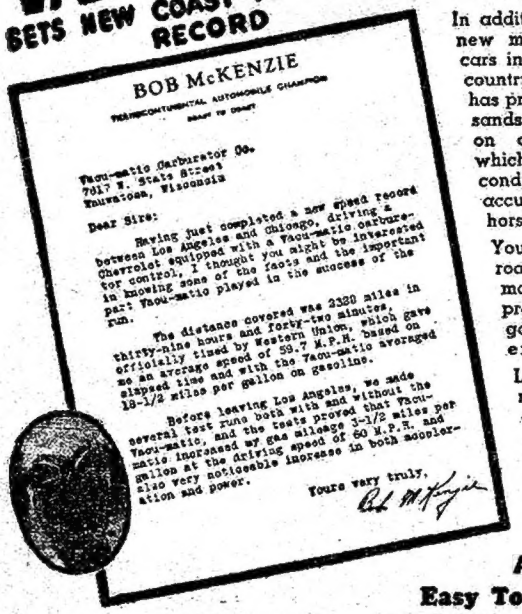

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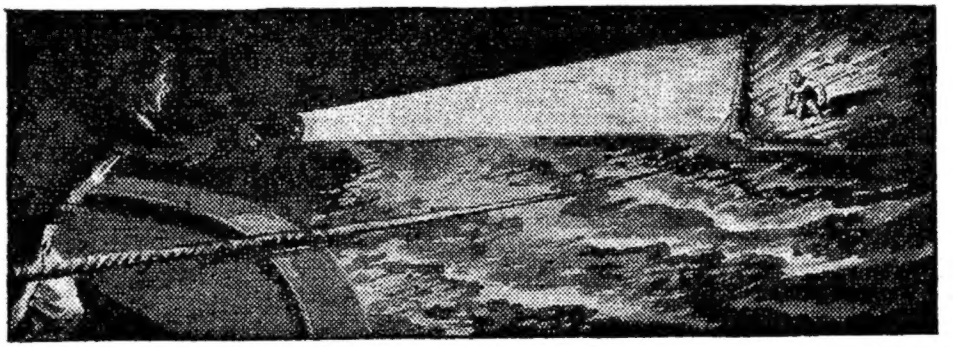

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READERS' DEPARTMENTS

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Editorial Prophecy and Future Issues.

—AND HAVING WRIT— . . . . .

The Readers speak their minds.

Illustrations by: Cartier, Orban and Schneeman

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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OF THINGS BEYOND

UNKNOWN is not a news magazine. Until comparatively recently, I never believed in prophets—the bearded kind that tell you today exactly what's going to happen tomorrow—and tell you exactly what *does* happen tomorrow.

I've begun to feel more and more uncomfortable about the neatly patterned, ordered, and well-explained world I must, of necessity, live in.

Remember "None But Lucifer"? Not being a news magazine, Unknown is worked out slowly, carefully, and leisurely. It takes time. "None But Lucifer" was printed in the September issue—but worked out in detail in April, 1939. It predicted the war, and the ways of the war, rather accurately, on a very silly premise. All its clever logic was based on that premise, and, naturally, wrong because the premise was inadmissible. Naturally, this isn't Hell, and there is no "Alexander P. Johnson" running it.

I'm beginning to wonder if those old prophets—the bearded, et cetera, kind—thought they were sometimes merely telling pretty darned intriguing stories?

The mind-teasing thing is this: in all ages there have been prophets. Ninety percent of them are strictly phony, 9.99 percent more are mostly mistaken, but there's a remaining, quite incredible 0.01 percent that can —and do—tell what's happening tomorrow and next year and next century.

There is no place for such phenomena in our neatly ordered world. Prophets—the kind that do accurately prophesy—do not fit into science anywhere. They aren't logical.

Nevertheless, history has attested to numerous prophets of perfect and impossible accuracy.

Somewhere, certainly, is such a prophet today. But it's a useless accomplishment, generally speaking, because history is the only test of such a prophet, when masses of his prophecies have been verified.

Which leaves mankind in this maddening dilemma: There are prophets. They can be found only by checking their prophecies against later-developed facts. By that time, of course, the prophecies are no longer prophecies.

Some day, maybe, our wonderful, facile science may find a prophet-spotterometer or something, so we can find them before they've run out.

THE EDITOR.

Next month's Unknown will be out one week earlier—the first Friday of August.

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"PIC" AMATEUR CONTEST *Now!*

THE MATHEMATICS OF MAGIC

by L. SPRAGUE de CAMP and FLETCHER PRATT

Put a man with knowledge of the scientific method in a world where magic works, and — Devil take the hindmost enchanter!

REED CHALMERS' mild eyes bugged as he watched his young friend and colleague. "Good gracious! That's the third of those steaks, somewhat inadequately called small. You'll uh

render yourself ill."

"Don't worry about me," replied Harold Shea, munching happily. "The last meal I had was twenty-four hours ago, and it was a little dish of oatmeal mush. Sour, too. Since then I've fought a duel with a couple of giants, done acrobatics on a magic broomstick, had a ride on Heimdall's enchanted brewery horse— Well, anyway, I've been roasted and frozen and shaken and nearly scared to death, and by Thor's hammer, I want food!"

An expression of pure bliss spread over his face as he stuffed into it a chunk of steak the size of his fist and chewed. Chalmers noted that this tallish, long-faced young man paid no attention to the fact that half the restaurant was staring at his suit of baggy Norse woolens, topped by a blue cloak with a fur collar.

"A . . uh . . . somewhat less rapid ingestion—" Chalmers began.

But Shea shook a finger, gulped down his mouthful, and spoke: "It checked your theory all right. In that universe the laws of contagion and similarity hold good—at least, the magic spells I figured out with their help worked all right."

Chalmers brushed the mop of gray hair from his eyes and looked pleased. "Amazing! Of course, I held that the transfer of the physical body to another spacetime frame by symbolic logic was possible or I should not have said so. But it is always a shock to have so . uh . . farfetched a deduction confirmed by experimental proof."

Shea said: "Sure, we've got something all right. But what are we going to do with it?"

Chalmers frowned. "It is rather . . uh obscure. Presents a wholly new world-picture, unlike anything but some of the Oriental religions. An infinity of universes, moving along parallel but distinct spacetime vectors. But, as you put it, what can be done with it? If I publish the results of your experiment they'll simply say poor old Chalmers has uh a tile loose, and in any case an experimental psychologist has no business venturing into physics. Think of Oliver Lodge." He shuddered. "The only satisfactory proof would be to send some of the doubters to another universe. Unfortunately, we could hardly count on their encountering Grua with a handful of enchanted snow. They would be unable to return, and the doubters left behind would be doubters still. You perceive the difficulty."

"Huh-uh. Wonder how the fight came out. It might be worth while going back to see."

"It would be inadvisable. The Ragnarök was only beginning when you left. You might return to find the giants had won and were in charge. If you wish adventure, there are plenty of other and less—" The voice trailed off.

"Other what?"

"Well, perhaps nothing of importance. I was about to say—systematic attainable universes. Since you left I have been engaged in the development of the structural theory of a multiple-universe cosmology, and—"

Shea interrupted. "Listen, Dr. Chalmers. We both know too much psychology to kid each other. Something's eating you besides multiple-universe mathematics."

"Harold"—Chalmers gave a sigh—"I've always maintained that you'd make a better . uh . . salesman or politician than psychologist. You're weak on theory, but in offhand, rule-of-thumb diagnosis of behavior patterns, you are incomparable."

"Don't evade, doctor."

"Very well. Were you perhaps thinking of making another journey soon?"

"Why, I just got back and haven't had time to think. Say! You aren't suggesting you'd like to go along, are you?"

Reed Chalmers rolled a fragment of bread into a precise gray pill. "As a matter of fact that's what I was suggesting, Harold. Here I am, fifty-six years old, without family or intimate friends—except you young men of the Garaden Institute. I have made—or believe I have—the greatest cosmological discovery since Copernicus, yet its nature is such that it cannot be proved, and no one will credit it without the most exhaustive proof." He shrugged slightly. "My work is done, but to a result that will afford me no appreciation in this world. May I not . . uh . be permitted the foible of seeking a fuller life elsewhere?"

BACK in Shea's room and seated in the best armchair, Chalmers stretched his legs and meditatively sipped a highball. "I'm afraid your suggestion of Cuchulinn's Ireland does not meet with my approval. An adventurous life, no doubt—but culturally a barbarism, with an elaborate system of taboos, violations of which are punished by the removal of heads."

"But the girls—" protested Shea. "After those piano-legged Scowegian blondes—"

"For a person of my age amorous adventure has few attractions. And as my partner in this enterprise I must ask you to remember that while you have . . . uh . certain physical skills that would be useful anywhere, I am limited to fields where intellectual attainments would be of more value than in ancient Ireland. The only nonwarriors who got anywhere in those days were minstrels—and I can neither sing nor play the harp."

Shea grinned maliciously. "All right, you leave the girls to me, then. But I guess you're right; we'll have to drop Queen Maev and Ossian." He peered around the bookshelves. "How about this?"

Chalmers examined the volume he handed down. "Spenser's 'Faerie Queene.' Mm-m-m—'vision unrolled after vision to the sound of varying music,' as Dr. Johnson said. Certainly a brilliant and interesting world, and one in which I personally might have some place. But I am afraid we should find it uncomfortable if we landed in the latter half of the story, where Queen Gloriana's knights are having a harder and harder time, as though Spenser were growing discouraged, or the narrative for some reason were escaping from his hands, taking on a life of its own. I'm not sure we could exercise the degree of selectivity needed to get into the story at the right point. After all, in your last experience, you attempted Ireland and arrived in Scandinavian myth."

"But, doctor," protested Shea, "if you're going adventuring you can't avoid—" and then stopped, his mouth open.

"You were about to say 'danger, were you not?" said Chalmers, with a smile. "I confess—"

Shea got to his feet. "Doctor. . doc—" he burst out. "Listen: why shouldn't we jump right into that last part of the 'Faerie Queene' and help Gloriana's knights straighten things out? You said you had worked out some new angles. We ought to be better than anyone else in the place. Look what I was able

to do in the Ragnarök with the little I know!"

"You are immodest, Harold," replied Chalmers, but he was leaning forward. "Still, it is an . . . uh . . . attractive plan; to look in another world for the achievement denied in this. Suppose you fill my glass agai while we consider details."

"Well, the first detail I'd like to know something about is what new wrinkles in theory, you have in mind."

CHALMERS settled himself and took on his lecture-room manner. "As I see it, our universes have a relation analagous to that of a pencil of parallel vectors," said he. "The vectors themselves represent time, of course. That gives us a six-dimensional cosmos—three in space, one in time, and two which define the relationships of one universe of the cosmos to another.

"You know enough mathematics to be aware that the 'fourth dimension,' so called, is only a dimension in the sense of a measurable quality, like color or density. The same applies for the interuniversal dimensions. I maintain—"

"Whoa!" said Shea. "Is there an infinite number of universes?"

"Ahem—I wish you would learn to avoid interruptions, Harold. I used to believe so. But now I consider the number finite, though very large.

"Let me continue. I maintain that what we call magic is merely . . . uh . . . the physics of some of these other universes. This physics is capable of operating along the interuniversal dimensions—"

"I see," Shea interrupted again. "Just as light can operate through interplanetary space, but sound requires some such conducting medium as air or water."

"The analogy is not perfect. Let me continue. You know how the theme of conjuring things up and making them disappear constantly recurs in fairy tales. These phenomena become plausible if we assume the enchanter is snatching things from another universe or banishing them to one."

Shea said: "I see an objection. If the laws of magic don't operate in the conducting medium of our universe, how's it possible to learn about them? I mean, how did they get into fairy stories?"

"The question is somewhat obvious. You remember my remarking that dements suffered hallucinations because their personalities were split between this universe and another? The same applies to the composers of fairy stories, though to a lesser degree. Naturally, it would apply to any writer of fantasy, such as Dunsany or Hubbard. When he describes some strange world, he is offering a somewhat garbled version of a real one, having its own set of dimensions quite independent of ours."

Shea sipped his highball in silence. Then he asked: "Why can't we conjure things into and out of thi universe?"

"We can. You successfully conjured yourself out of this one. But it is probable that certain of these parallel universes are easier of access than others. Ours—"

"Would be one of the hard kind?"

"Ahem. Don't interrupt, please. Yes. Now as to the time dimension, I'm inclined to think we can travel among universes only at right angles to the pencil of spacetime vectors, if you follow my use of a . . . a somewhat misleading analogy.

"However, it appears likely that our vectors are curved. A lapse of time along the inner side of the

curve would correspond to a greater lapse of time along the outer. You know the theme in certain fairy tales —the hero comes to fairyland, spends three days, and returns to find he has been gone three minutes or three years.

"The same feature would account for the possibility of landing in someone's imagined idea of the future. This is clearly a case where a mind has been running along one of the outer curved vectors at a speed which has outstripped the passage of time along our own inner side of the curve. The result— Harold, are you following me?"

Shea's highball glass had rolled onto the rug with a gentle *plunk*, and the suspicion of a snore came from his chair. Fatigue had caught up with him at last.

II.

NEXT WEEK END, Harold Shea went up to Cleveland. He was approaching this second time-journey with some misgivings. Chalmers was an astute old bird—no doubt about that. A good theorist. But it was the pursuit of the theory rather than its result that interested the old boy. How would he work out as a companion in a life of arduous adventure—a man of fifty-six, who had always led a sedentary life, and for that matter, who always seemed to prefer discussion to experience—

Well, too late to pull out now, Shea told himself as he entered the shop of the Montrose Costume Co. He asked to see medieval stuff. A clerk, who seemed to think that the word "medieval" had something to do with pirates, finally produced an assortment of doublets and hose, feathered hats and floppy boots of thin yellow leather. Shea selected a costume that had once been worn by the leading man in De Koven's "Robin Hood." It had no pockets, but a tailor could be found to remedy that. For Chalmers, he bought a similar but plainer outfit, with a monkish robe and attached hood. Chalmers was to go as a palmer, or pilgrim, a character which both felt would give him some standing.

The costume company's assortment of arms and armor proved not only phony but impractical. The chain mail was knitted woolens dipped in aluminum paint. The plate was sheets of tin-can thinness. The swords had neither edge, balance, nor temper. The antique shops had nothing better; their antique weapons were mostly Civil War cavalry sabers. Shea decided to use his own fencing épée. It had a rather stiff blade, and if he unscrewed the point d'arret, ground the end down to a sharp point, and contrived some kind of sheath, the weapon would do till he got something better.

The most serious question, as he explained to Chalmers on his return, was concern with the formulas of the magic they intended to use on their arrival. "How do you expect to read English in the Land of 'Faerie' when I couldn't in Scandinavia?" he demanded.

"I've allowed for that," Chalmers replied. "You forget that mathematics is a . . . a universal language, independent of words."

"All right. But will your mathematical symbols mean the same things?"

"Glance at this sheet, Harold. Knowing the principles of symbolic logic to begin with, I can look over this pictured equation with an apple at the left and a great many apples at the right, and thus realize it means that an apple belongs to the

class of apples. From that I shall infer that the horseshoe-shaped symbol in the center means 'is a member of the class of.'"

"You think that'll work, honest? But, say, how do we know that you and I will land in the same part of the 'Faerie' world?"

CHALMERS shrugged. "For that matter, how do we know we shan't land in Greek mythology? There are still laws of this method of transference to be worked out. We can only hold onto each other, read the formulas in chorus, and hope for the best."

Shea grinned. "And if it doesn't work, what the hell? Well, I guess we're ready." He inhaled deeply. "If P equals not-Q, Q implies not P, which is equivalent to saying either P or Q but not both. But if not-P is not implied by not-Q— Come in, Mrs. Ladd."

Shea's landlady opened the door, and opened her mouth to say something. But the something failed to come forth. She stared agape at a pair of respectable psychologists, standing side by side in medieval costumes, with rucksacks on their shoulders. They were holding hands and with their free hands holding sheets of paper. Chalmers purpled with embarrassment.

Shea bowed easily. "We're doing an experiment, Mrs. Ladd. We may be away for some time. If Mr. Polacek asks for us, let him in and tell him he can look at the papers in the top right-hand drawer. Thanks."

"But, Mr. Shea—"

"Please, Mrs. Ladd. You can sit down and watch if you like. Let's go, doctor—a conclusion can be drawn concerning the relation between two classes even if the evidence refers only to a part of some third class to which both are related. Whatever is predicated affirmatively or negatively of a class may be predicated in like manner of everything asserted to be contained in that class—"

Mrs. Ladd watched, ample bosom heaving. Her eyes bulged from her head; she'd have material for backfence conversations for months to come.

Pfmp! There was a movement of air, fluttering the papers on the table and whirling ashes from the ash trays. Mrs. Ladd, pulling herself together, moved a trembling hand through the space where her strangely dressed lodger had stood.

It met no resistance.

III.

CHALMERS spoke first. "Astounding! I should have thought the passage more difficult."

"Huh-uh." Shea looked around, sniffing the air with his head up. "Looks like a plain forest to me. Not as cold as the last one, thank God."

"I . . I suppose so. Though I'm sure I don't know what type of tree that is."

"I'd say some kind of eucalyptus," replied Shea. "That would mean a warm, dry climate. But look where the sun is. That means late afternoon, so we better get started."

"Dear me, I suppose so. Which direction would you suggest?"

"Dunno, but I can find out." Shea dropped his rucksack and swarmed up the nearest tree. He called down: "Can't see much. No, wait, there's a slope off that direction." He waved an arm, almost lost his footing, and slid down again in a small torrent of bark and leaves.

They started toward the slope in the hope that it represented a river

valley, where they could expect to find human habitations. After half a mile a scraping sound halted them wordlessly. They crept forward, peering. A tall, spotted buck was rubbing its horns against a tree. It flung up its head as it heard them, gave a sneezelike snort, and leaped gracefully away.

Shea said: "If he's just getting rid of his velvet, it ought to be late summer or early fall."

"I wasn't aware you were so much of a woodsman, Harold."

"What the hell, doc . . doctor, I've been having practice. What's that?"

Something far off had gone "*Ow-ooh,*" a sort of musical grunt, as though somebody had casually scraped the C string of a cello.

Chalmers fingered his chin. "It sounds remarkably like a lion. I trust we need not expect to encounter lions in this country."

The noise came again, louder. "Don't bet on it, doctor," said Shea. "If you remember your Spenser, there were plenty of lions around; also camels, bears, wolves, leopards, and aurochs, not to mention human fauna like giants and Saracens. What worries me is whether lions can climb trees."

"Merciful heavens! I don't know about lions, but I'm afraid I shouldn't be equal to much climbing. Let's hurry."

They strode on through the wood, a wood of open glades with little underbrush and no recognizable paths. A little breeze came up to make the leaves whisper overhead. The coughing roar of the lion came again, and Shea and Chalmers, without realizing, stepped up their pace to a trot. They glanced at each other and slowed down again.

Chalmers puffed: "It's good for a man of my age to have a little . . uh . . . exercise like this."

Shea grinned with one side of his mouth. They came out onto the edge of a meadow that stretched a couple of hundred yards downhill. At the bottom of the valley, more trees evidently concealed a stream. Shea scrambled up another tree for a look. Beyond the stream and its wide, shallow vale stood a castle, small in the distance and yellow in the low sun, with pennants writhing lazily from its turrets. He called down the news.

"Can you make out the devices on any of the pennants?" Chalmers answered. "I was . . I am . not altogether inexpert in matters of heraldry. It might be wise to learn something of the character of the institution."

"Not a damn thing," said Shea, and swung himself down. "Air's too quiet and she's too far away. Anyhow, I'd rather take a chance on the castle than on being part of a lion's breakfast. Let's go."

IN THE TONE of an announcer offering the express for East Chicago, Laporte, and South Bend on Track 18, a voice cried at them: "Who would enter Castle Caultrock?"

There was nobody in sight, but the travelers' eyes caught a flash of metal on one of the projecting balconies where the drawbridge chains entered the wall. Shea shouted back the rehearsed answer: "Travelers, to wit, Harold Shea, gentleman and squire, and Reed Chalmers, palmer!" "Wonder what they'd say about the 'gentleman,'" thought Shea, "if they knew my father was head bookkeeper of a meat-packing concern?"

The answer floated back: "This is a castle of deeds and ladies. The holy palmer may enter in the name

The knight lifted off "his" helmet — and golden hair cascaded down to her waist!

of God, but no gentleman unless he be accompanied of his fair dame, for such is the custom of this place."

Shea and Chalmers looked at each other. The latter was smiling happily. "Perfect selectivity!" he murmured. "This is exactly right; right at the beginning of Spenser's fourth book—" His voice trailed off and his face fell. "I don't quite know what to do about your being left out—"

"Go ahead in, doc. I've slept i the open before."

"But—" Just then a movable section in the bars of the portcullis creaked outward, and a man in armor stumbled through, apparently pushed from behind. There was a shout of derisive laughter. A horse was squeezed through the opening behind. The man took the reins and came toward them. He was a small man with close-cropped hair. A scar intersected one corner of a mouth drawn into a doleful expression.

"Hi," said Shea. "Did they throw you out?"

"I hight Hardimour. Aye; it is even the hour of vespers, and being ladyless I am put forth from the fair entertainment within." He smiled wryly. "And what hight you? Nay, tell me not now; for I see my dinner and bed approach, mounted on the back of a jennet."

The travelers turned to follow Hardimour's eyes behind them. Across the even meadow came a pair of horses, bearing an armored knight and his lady. The latter rode side-saddle, clad in rich garments of a trailing, impractical kind.

The little knight vaulted to his saddle with a lightness that was surprising, considering the weight of his hardware. He shouted, "Defend yourself, knight, or yield me your lady!" and snapped down his visor with a clang.

The smaller horse, with the woman, swung to one side. Shea gave a low whistle as he got a look at her: a slim, pale girl, with features as perfect as a cameo, and delicately rounded eyebrows. The other rider, without a word, whipped a cloth covering from his shield, revealing a black field on which broken spear points were picked out with silver. He swung a big black lance into position.

Heads appeared along the battlements of the castle. Shea felt Chalmers pluck at his sleeve. "That Sir Hardimour is in for trouble," said the older psychologist. "Sable, semée of broken spears is the bearing of Britomart."

Shea was watching the knights, who had spurred their horses to a heavy gallop. *Wham!* went lances against shields, and there were sparks in the fading light. The head of the little knight from the castle went back, his feet came up, and he turned a somersault through the air. He landed on his head with the sound of thirty feet of chain being dropped on a manhole cover.

THE STRANGER knight reined in and brought his horse back at a walk. Shea, followed by Chalmers, ran to where Sir Hardimour sprawled. The little knight seemed to be out cold. As Shea fumbled with unfamiliar fingers at his helmet fastenings, he sat up groggily and helped get it off. He drew in a long breath.

"By'r Lady," he remarked with a rueful grin, "I have stood before Blandamour of the Iron Arm, but that was as rude a dint as ever I took." He looked up as the knight who had overthrown him approached. "It seems I was too ambitious. To whom do I owe the

pleasure of a night with the crickets?"

The other pulled up his visor to reveal a fresh young face. "Certes," he said in a light, high-pitched voice, "you are a very gentle person, young sir, and shall not spend a night with the crickets and bugbears if I can help it. Ho, warder!"

The castle guard's head came through the gate in the portcullis. "Your worship," he said.

"Have I fairly gained admittance to Castle Caultrock as the knight of this lady?"

"That is most true."

The knight of the shivered spears on their field of black put both hands up to his own helmet and lifted it off. A sunburst of golden hair burst forth and flowed down to his—her—waist. Behind him Shea heard Chalmers chuckle, "I told you it was Britomart." He remembered that Britomart was the warrior girl who could beat most of the men in the "Faerie Queene."

She was speaking: "Then I declare I am the lady of this good knight who has been overthrown, and since he has a lady he may enter."

The warder looked worried and scratched his chin. "The point is certainly very delicate. If you are her knight—and yet his lady—how can she be your lady and he your knight? Marry, I warrant me this is a case Sir Artegall himself could not unravel. Enter, all-three!"

Shea spoke up: "Beg pardon, miss, but I wonder if I could arrange to go in as your friend's man?"

"That you may not, sir!" she replied haughtily. "She shall be no man's lady till I restore her to her husband; for this is that Lady Amoret who was foully stolen from her spouse's arms by Busyrane, the enchanter. If you wish to be her knight, you must even try Sir Hardimour's fate against me."

"Hm-m-m," said Shea. "But you're going in as Sir Hardimour's lady?" They nodded. He turned to the latter. "If I had a horse and all the fixings, Sir Knight, I'd fight you for the privilege of being Miss Britomart's man. But as it is I'll challenge you to a round on foot with swords and without armor."

Hardimour's scarred face registered an astonishment that changed to something like pleasure. "Now, that is a strange sort of challenge—" he began.

"Yet not unheard of," interrupted the statuesque Britomart. "I mind me that Sir Artegall fought thus against three brothers at the Ford of Thrack."

Chalmers was plucking at Shea's sleeve again. "Harold, I consider it most unwise—"

"*Shh!* I know what I'm doing. Well, Sir Knight, how about it?"

"Done." Sir Hardimour unbuckled himself from his chrysalis of steel. He stepped forward, his feet feeling uncertainly on the smooth grass which he was used to crossing in metal shoes.

HARDIMOUR stamped and swung his sword a couple of times in both hands. He shifted it to one and moved toward Shea. Shea waited quietly, balancing the épée. Hardimour made a couple of tentative cuts at Shea, who parried easily. Then, feeling surer of his footing, Hardimour stepped forward nimbly, swinging his sword up for a real clash. Shea straightened his arm and lunged, aiming for Hardimour's exposed forearm. He missed, and jumped back before the knight's sword came down, gleaming red in the setting sun.

As the blade descended, Shea

flipped it aside with a parry in carte, being careful not to let the heavy blade meet his thin épée squarely. Hardimour tried again, a forehand cut at Shea's head. Shea ducked under it and pricked Hardimour's arm before he could recover. Shea heard Chalmers' quick intake of breath and an encouraging word from Britomart, "Bravely done, oh, bravely!"

Hardimour came on again, swinging. Shea parried, lunged, missed again, but held his lunge and drilled the knight's arm properly with a remise. The slim steel needle went through the muscles like butter. Britomart clapped her hands.

Shea withdrew his blade and recovered, keeping the épée flickering between them. "Had enough?" he asked.

"By God's wounds, no!" gritted Hardimour. The sleeve of his shirt was turning dark red, and he was sweating, but he looked thoroughly grim. He swung the sword up in both hands, wincing slightly. The épée flickered out and ripped his now-dripping shirt sleeve. He checked, and held his sword out in front of him, trying to imitate Shea's fencing position. Shea tapped it ringingly a couple of times, gathered it up in a bind in octave, and lunged. Hardimour saved himself by stumbling backward. Shea followed him. *Flick, flick, flick* went the thin blade, Hardimour's eyes following it in fearful fascination. He tried to parry the repeated thrust, but could no longer control his big blade. Shea forced him back zigzag, got him into the position he wanted, feinted, and lunged. He stopped his point just as it touched the smaller man's chest. Hardimour put a foot back, but found no support. His arms went up, his sword whirling over and over, till it went *plunk!* into the moat. Sir Hardimour followed it with a great splash.

When he came up with a green water plant plastered on his forehead, Shea was kneeling at the edge.

Hardimour cried: *"Glup . . . pffth . . . ugh!* help! I can't swim!"

Shea extended Chalmers' staff. Hardimour caught it and pulled himself up. As he scrambled to his feet, he found that villainous épée blade flickering in his face.

"Give up?" demanded Shea.

Hardimour blinked, coughed up some more water, and sank to his knees. "I cry craven," he said grudgingly. Then: "Curse it! In another bout I'll beat you, Master Harold!"

"But I won this one," said Shea. "After all, I didn't want to sleep with the crickets, either."

"Right glad am I that you shall not," said Hardimour honestly, feeling of his arm. "What galls me is that twice I've been put to shame before all these noble lords and ladies of Castle Caultrock. And after all, I must stay without."

Chalmers spoke up. "Hasn't the castle some rule about admitting persons in distress?"

"I bethink me this is even the case. Sick or wounded knights may enter till they are well."

"Well," said Shea, "that arm won't be well for a couple of months."

"Perhaps you caught a cold from your ducking," advised Chalmers.

"I thank you, reverend palmer. Perhaps I did." Hardimour sneezed experimentally.

"Put more feeling into it," said Shea.

Hardimour did so, adding a racking cough. "Ah, me, I burn with ague!" he cried, winking. "Good people of the castle, throw me at

least a cloak to wrap myself in, ere I perish! Oooo-ah!" He sank realistically to the ground. They got him up, and supported him, staggering, across the drawbridge. Britomart and Amoret followed, the former leading the three horses. This time the warder made no objection.

IV.

A TRUMPET blew three notes as they passed through the gate in the portcullis. The last note was sour. As the travelers entered a paved courtyard littered by heaps of dirty straw, they were surrounded by a swarm of little page boys in bright-colored costumes. All were chattering, but they seemed to know what to do. They attached themselves two by two to each of the new arrivals and led them toward the door of a tall gray stone building that rose from the opposite side of the court.

Shea was taken in tow by a pair of youths who gazed at him admiringly. Each wore medieval hose, with one leg red and the other white. As he mounted a winding stair under their guidance, one of them piped: "Are you only a squire, sir?"

"*Shh!*" said the other. "Have you no manners, Bevis? The lord hasn't spoken."

"Oh, that's all right," said Shea. "Yes, I'm only a squire. Why?"

"Because you're such a good swordsman, worshipful sir. Sir Hardimour is a right good knight." He looked wistful. "Will you show me that trick of catching an enemy's blade sometime, worshipful sir? I want to slay an enchanter."

They had arrived at the entrance of a long, high room, with a huge four-poster bed in one corner. One of the pages ran ahead, and kneeling before a cross-legged chair, brushed it off for Shea to sit on. As he did so, the other reached around him and unbuckled his sword belt, while the first ran out of the room. A moment later he was back, carrying a big copper basin of steaming water, a towel over his arm.

Shea gathered he was expected to wash his hands. They needed it.

"In the name of Castle Caultrock," said the little Bevis, "I crave your lordship's pardon for not offering him a bath. But the hour of dinner is now so near—"

He was interrupted by a terrific blowing of trumpets, mostly out of tune and all playing different things, that might have heralded the arrival of the new year.

"The trumpets for dinner!" said the page who was wiping Shea's hands for him, somewhat to his embarrassment. "Come."

It had fallen dusk outside. The winding stair up which they had come was black as a boot. Shea was glad of the page's guiding hand. The boy sure-footedly led the way to the bottom, across a little entry hall where a single torch hung in a wall bracket. He threw open a door, announcing in his thin voice, "Master Harold de Shea!"

THE ROOM beyond was large—at least fifty feet long and nearly as wide, wretchedly lighted—according to American standards—by alternate torches and tapers along the wall. Shea, who had recently been in the even dimmer illumination of Bonder Sverre's house, found the light good enough to see that the place was filled with men and ladies, gabbing as they moved through an arch at the far end into the dining hall.

Chalmers was not to be seen. Britomart was visible a few feet away. She was the tallest person in

the room with the exception of himself, and fully equal to his own five feet eleven.

He made his way toward her. "Well, Master Squire," she greeted him unsmilingly, "it seems that since I am become your lady you are to take me to dinner. You may give the kiss of grace, but no liberties, you understand?" She pushed her cheek toward him, and since he was apparently expected to do so, he kissed it. That was easy enough. With a little make-up she might have been drawn by George Petty.

Preceded by the little Bevis they entered into the tall dining hall. They were led to the raised central part of the U-shaped table. Shea was glad to see that Chalmers had already been seated, two places away from him. The intervening space was already occupied by the cameolike Amoret. To the evident discomfort of Chalmers, she was pouring the tale of her woes into his ear with machine-gun speed.

"—and, oh, the tortures that foul fiend Busyrane put me to!" she was saying. "With foul shows and fantastic images on the walls of the cell where I was held. Now he'd declare how my own Scudamour was unfaithful to me; now offer me great price for my virtue—"

"How many times a day did he demand it?" inquired a knight beyond, leaning down the table.

"Never less than six," said Amoret, "and oft as many as twenty. When I refused—as ever I must—the things past understanding—"

Shea heard Chalmers murmur: "What, never? No, never. What, *never*—"

The knight said: "Sir Scudamour may well take pride in such a wife, gentle lady, who has borne so much for his sake."

"What else could she do?" asked Britomart coldly.

Shea spoke up: "I could think of one or two things."

The Petty girl turned on him, blue eyes flashing. "Master Squire, your insinuations are vile, and unworthy the honor of knighthood! Had you made them beyond that gate, I would prove them so on your body, with spear and sword."

She was, he observed with some astonishment, genuinely angry. "Sorry, I was joking," he offered.

"Chastity, sir, is no subject for jest!" she snapped.

Before the conversation could be carried further, Shea jumped at another tremendous blast of trumpets. A file of pages pranced in with silver plates. Shea noted there was only one plate for him and Britomart together. Looking down the table, he saw that each pair, knight and lady, had been similarly served. This was apparently one of the implications of being a knight's "lady." Shea would have liked to inquire whether there were any others; but in view of Britomart's rebuff at his mild joke at Amoret, he didn't quite dare.

The trumpets blew again, this time to usher in a file of serving men bearing trays of food. That set before Shea and Britomart was a huge pastry, elaborately made in the form of a potbellied medieval ship, upon which the page Bevis fell with a carving knife. As he worked at it, Chalmers leaned around Amoret's back and, touching Shea's sleeve, remarked: "Everything's going according to plan."

"How do you mean?"

"The logical equations. I looked at them in my room. They puzzled me a bit at first, but I checked them against that key I made up,

and everything fitted into place."

"Then you can really work magic?"

"I'm pretty sure. I tried a little enchantment on a cat that was strolling around. Worked a spell on some feathers and gave it wings." He chuckled. "I daresay there will be some astonishment among the birds in the forest tonight. It flew out the window."

Shea felt a nudge at his other side, and turned to face Britomart. "Will my lord, as is his right, help himself first?" she said. She indicated the plate. Her expression plainly said she hoped any man who helped himself before her would choke on what he got. Shea surveyed her for a second.

"Not at all," he answered. "You go first. After all, you're a better knight than I am. You pitched Hardimour down with a spear. If you hadn't softened him up, I couldn't have done a thing."

Her smile told him he had gauged her psychology correctly. "Grace," said she. She plunged her hand into the pile of meat that had come out of the pastry ship, put a good-sized lump into her mouth. Shea followed her example. He nearly jumped out of his chair, and snatched for the wine cup in front of him.

The meat tasted like nothing on earth. It was heavily salted, and sweet, and almost all other flavors were drowned in a terrific taste of cloves. Two big tears of agony came into Shea's eyes as he took a long pull at the wine cup.

The wine reeked of cinnamon. The tears ran down his cheek.

"Ah, good Squire Harold," came Amoret's voice, "I don't wonder that you weep at the tale of the agonies through which I have passed. Was ever faithful lady so foully put upon?"

"For my part," said the knight farther down the table, "I think this Busyrane is a vile, catiff rogue, and willingly would I take the adventure of putting an end to him."

Britomart gave a hard little laugh. "You won't find that so easy, Sir Erivan. Firstly, you shall know that Busyrane dwells in the wood where the Losels breed, those most hideous creatures that are half-human in form, yet eat of human flesh. They are ill to overcome. Secondly, this Busyrane conceals his castle by arts magical, so it is hard to find. And thirdly, having found it and Busyrane himself, he is a very stout and powerful fighter, whom few can match. In all Faerie, I know of only two that might overthrow him."

"And who are they?" asked Erivan.

"This one is Sir Cambell, who is a knight of great prowess. Moreover, he has to wife Cambina, who is much skilled in the white magic that might pass both through the Losels and Busyrane's enchantments. The other is my own dear lord and affianced husband, Sir Artegall, justiciar to our queen."

"There, you see!" cried Amoret. "That's the kind of person who was after me. Oh, what sufferings! Oh, how I ever—"

"*Ssst*, Amoret!" interrupted Chalmers. "Your food's getting cold, child."

"How true, good palmer." A tear trickled down Amoret's lovely pale cheek as she rolled a huge ball of food between her fingers and thrust it into her mouth. As she chewed she managed to exclaim: "Oh, what would I do without the good friends who aid me!" There was certainly nothing weak about the frail-looking lady's appetite.

TRUMPETS SOUNDED the end of the course, and as one set of serving men took away the plates, another emerged with more dishes. Pages came running to each couple with metal bowls of water and towels. Sir Erivan, beyond Chalmers, lifted his wine cup and then set it down again.

"Ho, varlet!" he cried. "My wine cup is empty. Is it the custom of Caultrock to let the guests perish of thirst?"

The servitor signaled another, and a small, wizened man in a fur-lined jacket hurried up and bowed to Sir Erivan.

"My very gracious lord," he said, "I crave your pardon. But a most strange malady has befallen the wine, and it's turned sour. All the wine in Castle Caultrock. The good Fray Montelius has pronounced an exorcism over it, but to no purpose. There must be a powerful enchantment on it."

"What?" shouted Sir Erivan. "By the seven thousand demons of Gehenna, do you expect us to drink *water?*" And then, shrugging his shoulders, he turned toward Chalmers. "You see how it is, reverend sir. Daily we knights of Faerie are compassed closer about by these evil spells till we know not what to do. I misdoubt me they will make trouble at the tournament."

"What tournament?" asked Shea.

"The tournament of Satyrane, the woodland knight, at his forest castle, three days hence. It will be a most proud and joyous occasion. There's to be jousting, ending with a mêlée, for the prize among knights, and also a tourney of beauty for the ladies after. I've heard that the prize of beauty is to be that famous girdle of the Lady Florimel, which none but the most chaste may bind on."

"Oh, how you frighten me!" said Amoret. "I was kidnaped from a tournament, you know. Now I shall hardly dare attend this one, if there will be enchanters present. Just think, one might win the prize of valor and I be awarded to him of right!"

"*I* shall be in the lists for you," said Britomart, a trifle haughtily.

Shea asked: "Does the winner of the men's prize get the winner of the prize of beauty?"

Sir Erivan looked at him in some astonishment. "You are pleased to jest— No, I see you are really a foreigner and don't know. Well, then, such is the custom of Faerie. But I misdoubt me these enchanters and their spells." He shook his head gloomily.

Shea said: "Say, my friend Chalmers and I might be able to help you out a little."

"In what manner?"

Chalmers was making frantic efforts to signal him to silence, but Shea ignored them. "We know a little magic of our own. Pure white magic, like that Lady Cambina you spoke of. For instance— Doc, think you could do something about the wine situation?"

"Why . ahem . . . that is . . . I suppose I might, Harold. But don't you think—"

Shea did not wait for the objection. "If you'll be patient," he said, "my friend the palmer will work some of his magic. What'll you need, doc?"

Chalmers' brow furrowed. "A gallon or so of water, yes. Perhaps a few drops of good wine. Some grapes and bay leaves—"

Somebody interrupted: "As well ask for the moon in a basket as grapes at Caultrock. Last week came a swarm of birds and stripped

the vines bare. Enchanter's work, by hap; they do not love us here."

"Dear me! Would there be a cask?"

"Aye, marry, a mort o' 'em. Rudiger, an empty cask!"

THE CASK was rolled down the center of the tables. The guests buzzed as they saw the preparations. Other articles were asked and refused till there was produced a stock of cubes of crystallized honey, crude and unstandardized in shape, "—but they'll do as sugar cubes, lacking anything better," Chalmers told Shea.

A piece of charcoal served Chalmers for a pencil. On each of the lumps of crystallized honey he marked a letter, O, C, or H. A little fire was got going on the stone floor in the center of the tables. Chalmers dissolved some of the honey in some of the water, put the water in the cask and some of straw in the water. The remaining lumps of honey he stirred about the table top with his fingers, as though playing some private game of anagrams, reciting meanwhile:

"So oft as I with state of present time
The image of our uh happi-
ness compare,
So oft I find how less we are than prime,
How less our joy than that we once did
share:
Thus do I ask those things that once we had
To make an evening run its wonted
course,
And banish from this company the sad
Thoughts that in utter abstinence have
their source:
Change then! For, bei
cannot be worse!"

As he spoke, he withdrew a few of the lumps, arranging them thus:

H H

H C C O H

H H

"By the splendor of heaven!" cried a knight with a short beard, who had risen and was peering into the cask. "The palmer's done it!"

Chalmers reached over and pulled the straw from the top of the cask, dipped some of the liquid into his goblet and sipped. "God bless my soul!" he murmured.

"What is it, doc?" asked Shea.

"Try it," said Chalmers, passing him the goblet.

Shea tried it, and for the second time that evening almost upset the table.

The liquid was the best Scotch whiskey he had ever tasted.

The thirsty Sir Erivan spoke up: "Is aught amiss with your spell-wrought wine?"

"Nothing," said Chalmers, cept that it's rather uh potent."

"May one sample it, Sir Palmer?"

"Go easy on it," said Shea, passing down the goblet.

Sir Erivan went easy, but nevertheless exploded into a series of coughs. "*Whee!* A beverage for the gods on Olympus! None but they would have gullets of the proper temper. Yet methinks I should like more."

Shea diluted the next slug of whiskey with water before giving it to the serving man to pass down the table. The knight with the short beard made a face at the flavor. "This tastes like no wine I wot of," said he.

"Most true," said Erivan, "but 'tis proper nectar, and makes one feel wonnnnnnderful! More, I pray you!"

"May I have some, please?" asked Amoret, timidly.

Chalmers looked unhappy. Britomart intervened: "Before you sample strange waters I myself will try." She picked up the goblet she was

sharing with Shea, took a long, quick drink.

Her eyes goggled and watered, but she held it well. "Too . . . strong for my little charge," said she when she got her breath back.

"But, Lady Britomart—"

"Nay. It would not— Nay, I say."

THE SERVITORS were busy handing out the Scotch, which left a trail of louder talk and funnier jokes in its wake. Down the table some of the people were dancing; the kind of dance wherein you spend your time holding up your partner's hand and bowing. Shea had just enough whiskey in him to uncork his natural recklessness. He bowed half-mockingly to Britomart. "Would my lady care to dance?"

"No," she said solemnly. "I do it not. So many responsibilities have I had that I've never learned. Another drink, please."

"Oh, come on! I don't, either, the way they do here. But we can try."

"No," she said. "Poor Britomart never indulges in the lighter pleasures. Always busy, righting wrongs and setting a good example of chastity. Not that anyone heeds it."

Shea saw Chalmers slip Amoret a shot of whiskey. The perfect beauty coughed it down. Then she began talking very fast about the sacrifices she had made to keep herself pure for her husband. Chalmers began looking around for help. "Serves the doc right," thought Shea. Britomart was pulling his sleeve.

"It's a shame," she sighed. "They all say Britomart needs no man's sympathy. She's the girl who can take care of herself."

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"Mush worst. I mean much worse. They all say Britomart has no sense of humor. That's because I do my duty. Conscientious. That's the trouble. *You* think I have a sense of humor, don't you, Master Harold de Shea?" She looked at him accusingly.

Shea privately thought that "they all" were right. But he answered: "Of course I do."

"That's splendid. It gladdens my heart to find someone who understands. I like you, Master Harold. You're tall, not like these little pigs of men around here. Tell me, *you* don't think I'm too tall, do you? You wouldn't say I was just a big blond horse?"

"Perish the thought!"

"Would you even say I was good-looking?"

"And how!" Shea wondered how this was going to end.

"Really, truly good-looking, even if I am tall?"

"Sure, you bet, honest." Shea saw that Britomart was on the verge of tears. Chalmers was busy trying to stanch Amoret's verbal hemorrhage, and couldn't help.

"Thass glorious. I'm so glad to find sommebody who likes me as a woman. They all admire me, but nobody cares for me as a woman. Have to set a good example. Tell you a secret." She leaned toward him in such a marked manner that Shea glanced around to see whether they were attracting attention.

They were not. Sir Erivan, with a Harpo Marx expression, was chasing a plump, squeaking lady from pillar to pillar. The dancers were doing a snake dance. From one corner came a roar where knights were betting their shirts at knucklebones.

"Tell you shecret," she went on, raising her voice. "I get tired of being a good example. Like to be really human. Just once. Like this." She grabbed Shea out of his

seat as if he had been a puppy dog, slammed him down on her lap, and kissed him with all the gentleness of an affectionate tornado.

Then she heaved him out of her lap with the same amazing strength and pushed him back into his place. "No," she said gloomily. "No. My responsibilities. Must think on them." A big tear rolled down her cheek. "Come, Amoret. We must to bed."

V.

THE EARLY SUN had not yet reached the floor of the courtyard when Shea came back, grinning. He told Chalmers: "Say, doc, silver has all kinds of value here! The horse and ass together only cost $4.60."

"Capital! I feared some other metal would pass current, or that they might have no money at all. Is the . . uh . . donkey domesticated?"

"Tamest I ever saw Hello, there, girls!" This was to Britomart and Amoret, who had just come out. Britomart had her armor on, and a stern, martial face glowered at Shea out of the helmet.

"How are you this morning?" asked that young man, unabashed.

"My head beats with the cruel beat of an anvil, an' you must know." She turned her back. "Come, Amoret, there is no salve like air, and if we start now we shall be at Satyrane's castle as early as those who ride late and fast with more pain."

"We're going that way, too," said Shea. "Hadn't we better ride along with you?"

"For protection's sake, mean you? Hah! Little enough use that overgrown bodkin you bear would be if we came to real combat. Or is it that you wish to ride under the guard of my arm?" She shook it with a clang of metal.

Shea grinned. "After all, you *are* technically my lady-love—" He ducked as she swung at him, and hopped back out of reach.

Amoret spoke up: "Ah, Britomart, but do me the favor of letting them ride with us! The old magician is so sympathetic."

Shea saw Chalmers start in dismay. But it was too late to back out now. When the women had mounted they rode through the gate together. Shea took the lead with the grumpily silent Britomart. Behind him, he could hear Amoret prattling cheerfully at Chalmers, who answered in monosyllables.

The road, no more than a bridle path without marks of wheeled traffic, paralleled the stream. The occasional glades that had been visible near Castle Caultrock disappeared. The trees drew in on them and grew taller till they were riding through a perpetual twilight, only here and there touched with a bright fleck of sunlight.

After two hours Britomart drew rein. As Amoret came up, the warrior girl announced: "I'm for a bath. Join me, Amoret?"

The girl blushed and simpered. "These gentlemen—"

"Are gentlemen," said Britomart, with a glare at Shea that implied he had jolly well better be a gentleman, or else. "We will halloo." She led the way down the slope and between a pair of mossy trunks.

Shea turned to Chalmers. "How's the magic going?"

"Ahem," said the professor. "We were right about the general worsening of conditions here. Everyone seems aware of it, but they don't quite know what causes it or what to do about it."

"Do you?"

Chalmers pinched his chin. "It would seem . . uh . . . reasonable to suspect the operations of a kind of guild of evil, of which various enchanters, like this Busyrane mentioned last night, form a prominent part. I indicate the souring of the wine and the loss of the grapes as suggestive examples."

Shea said: "Yeah. But what can we do about it?"

"I'm not quite certain yet. The obvious step would be to observe some of these people in operation and learn something of their technique. This tournament—"

AMORET's voice interrupted Shea: "You may come now, gentlemen." The girls were dressed, and drying their hair by spreading it to a shaft of sunlight with open hands.

The bath had improved Britomart's disposition, Shea noted when they got started again. She was willing enough to piece out the gaps in his knowledge by answering leading questions as they rode along. Since she seemed a simple and direct person, the method worked very well.

Britomart was, she admitted, one of Queen Gloriana's "companions, or officers"—a "count" in the old Frankish sense of the term. There were twelve of these, each charged with the righting of wrongs in some special field of the land of Faerie. "Ye olde-tyme policewoman," thought Shea. He asked whether there were grades of authority among the companions.

"That hangs by what matter is under consideration. In questions involving the relations of one man to another, I am less than those gallant knights, Sir Cambell and Sir Triamond. Again, should it be a point of justice, the last authority rests with Sir Artegall."

Her voice changed a trifle on the last word. Shea remembered how she had mentioned Artegall the evening before. "What's he like?"

"Oh, a most gallant princely rogue, I warrant you!" She touched her horse with the spurs so that he pranced, and she had to soothe him with: "Quiet, Beltran!"

"Yes?" Shea encouraged.

"Well, for the physical side of him, somewhat dark of hair and countenance; tall, and so strong with lance that not Redcross or Prince Arthur himself can bear the shock of his charge. That was how I came to know him. We fought; I was the better with the spear, but at swords he overthrew me and was like to have killed me before he found I was a woman. I fell in love with him forthwith," she finished simply.

Singular sort of courtship, thought Shea, but even in the world I came from there are girls who fall for that kind of treatment. Aloud he said: "I hope he fell for you, too."

Britomart surprised him by heaving a sigh. "Alas, fair squire, that I must confess I do not know. 'Tis true he plighted himself to marry me, but he's ever off to some tournament, or riding to some quest that I know not the end or hour of. We'll be married when he gets back, quotha, but when he does return, it's to praise my courage or strength, and never a word to show he thinks of me as a woman. He'll clap me on the back and say: 'Good old Britomart, I knew I could depend on you. And now I have another task for you; a dragon, this time.'"

"Hm-m-m," said Shea. "Don't suppose you ever heard of psychology?"

"Nay, not I."

"Do you ever dress up? I mean,

like some of those ladies at Castle Caultrock."

"Of what use to me such foibles? Could I pursue my tasks as companion in such garb?"

"Do you ever roll your eyes up at Artegall and tell him how wonderful he is?"

"Nay, marry beshrew me! What would he think of so unmaidenly conduct?"

"That's just the point; just what he's waiting for! Look here, in my country the girls are pretty good at that sort of thing, and I've learned most of the tricks. I'll show you a few, and you can practice on me. I don't mind."

THEY DINED rather thinly that night, on coarse brown bread and cheese which Britomart produced from a pack at the back of her saddle. They slept in cushiony beds of fern, three inches deep. The next day they rode in the same arrangement. Chalmers rather surprisingly consented. He explained: "The young lady is certainly very . . uh . . verbose, but she has a good deal of information to offer with regard to the methods of this Busyrane. I should prefer to continue the conversation."

As soon as they were on the road Britomart pulled up her visor and, leaning toward Shea, rolled her eyes. "You must be weary, my most dear lord," she said, "after your struggle with those giants. Come, sit and talk. I love to hear—"

Shea grinned. "Overdoing it a little, old girl. Better start again."

"You must be weary— Hola, what have we here?"

The track had turned and mounted to a plateaulike meadow. As they emerged into the bright sun, a trumpet sounded two sharp notes. There was a gleam of metal from the other side. Shea saw a knight with a shield marked in wavy stripes of green drop his lance into place and start toward him.

"Sir Paridell, as I live!" snapped Britomart, in her policewoman's voice. "Oft an illdoer and always a lecher. Ha! Well met! Gloriana!" The last shouted word was muffled in her helmet as the visor snapped shut. Her big black horse bounded toward this sudden opponent, the ebony lance sticking out past his head. They met with a crash. Paridell held the saddle, but his horse's legs flew out from under. Man and animal came down together in a whirlwind of dust.

Shea and Chalmers reached him together and managed to pull the horse clear. When they got Paridell's helmet off he was breathing, but there was a thin trickle of blood at his lips. He was unconscious.

Shea gazed at him a moment, then had an inspiration. "Say, Britomart," he asked, "what are the rules about taking the arms of a guy like that?"

Britomart looked at her late opponent without pity. "Since the false knave attacked us, I suppose they belong to me."

"He must have heard I was traveling in your company," piped Amoret. "Oh, the perils I go through!"

Shea was not to be put off. "I was wondering if maybe I couldn't use that outfit."

Paridell's squire, a youth with a thin fuzz of beard on his chin and the trumpet over his shoulder, had joined them. He was bending over his master, trying to revive him by forcing the contents of a little flask between his lips. Now he looked up. "Nay, good sir," he said to Brito-

mart, "punish him not so. He did but catch a glimpse of you as you rode up, and mistook this dame for the Lady Florimel."

A FLUSH of anger went up Britomart's face. "In very truth!" she cried. "Now if I had no thought before of penalties, this would be more

Chalmers discovered new possibilities of speed, and a just-near-enough tree—

than I needed. Sir, I am Britomart of the companions, and this Paridell of yours is a most foul scoundrel. Strip him of his arms!"

"What about me?" asked Shea insistently. "That tournament—"

"You could not ride in the tournament in a knight's arms without being yourself knight, fair squire."

"Ahem!" said Chalmers. "I think my young friend would make a very good addition to the knights of your Queen Gloriana's court."

"True, reverend sir," said Britomart, "but the obligation of knighthood is not lightly undertaken. He must either watch by his arms in a chapel all night, and have two proved knights to vouch him; or he must perform some great deed on the battlefield. Here we have neither the one nor the other."

"I remember how my Scudamour—" began Amoret.

But Chalmers broke in, "Couldn't you swear him in as a kind of deputy?"

"There is no—" began Britomart, and then checked herself. "'Tis true, I have no squire at present. If you, Master Harold, will take the oaths and ride as my squire, that is, without a crest to your helmet, it might be managed."

The oath was simple enough, about allegiance to Queen Gloriana and Britomart in her name, a promise to suppress malefactors, protect the weak, and so on.

Shea and Chalmers pulled off Sir Paridell's armor together. His squire clucked distractedly through the process. Paridell came to in the middle of it, and Chalmers had to sit on his head until it was finished.

Shea learned that a suit of armor was heavier than it looked. It was also a trifle small in the breastplate. Fortunately Paridell—a plump young man with bags under his eyes—had a large head. So there was no trouble with the well-padded helmet, from which Britomart knocked off the crest with the handle of her sword.

She also lent Shea her own shield cover. She explained that Paridell's engrailed green bars would cause any of half a dozen knights to challenge him to a death duel on sight.

They had eaten the last of their provisions at lunch. Shea had remarked to Chalmers on the difficulty of getting a bellyful of adventure and one of food on the same day. So the sight of Satyrane's castle, all rough and craggy and set amid trees, held a welcome promise of food and entertainment. Unlike that of Caultrock, it had portcullis and gate open onto the immense courtyard. Here workmen were hammering at temporary stands at one side.

The place was filled with knights and ladies, most of them familiar to Britomart and Amoret. Shea quite lost track of the number he was introduced to. In the hall before the dinner trumpet he met one he'd remember: Satyrane himself, a thick bear of a man, with a spade-beard and huge voice.

"All Britomart's friends are mine!" he shouted. "Take a good place at the table folks. Hungry, not so? We're all hungry here; like to starve." He chuckled. "Eat well, good squire; you'll need strength tomorrow. There will be champions. Blandamour of the Iron Arm has come, and so have Cambell and Triamond."

VI.

AT TEN the next morning, Shea came out of the vaultlike castle passage and blinked into the morning sun. Armor pressed his body in unfamiliar places. The big broadsword

at his side, was heavier than any he had ever handled.

The stands were finished and occupied by a vocal swarm of gentlemen and ladies in bright clothes. At their center was a raised booth under a canopy. In it sat an old man with frosty-white hair and beard. He held a bundle of little yellow sticks.

"Who's he?" asked Shea of Britomart, walking just a step ahead of him across the wide courtyard to a row of tents at the opposite side.

"*Sssh!* The honorable judge of the lists. Each time one of the knights scores a brave point he shall notch the stick of that knight, and thus the winner will be chosen."

They had reached the row of tents, behind which grooms held horses. A trumpet blew three clear notes and a mounted herald rode right past them. Behind him came Satyrane, on a big white horse. He had his helmet off, and was grinning and bobbing his head like a clumsy, amiable bear. He held a richly carved gold casket. As he reached the front of the stands, he opened it up and took from it a long girdle, intricately worked and flashing with jewels. The trumpeter blew another series of notes, and shouted in a high voice:

"This is that girdle of Florimel which none but the chaste may wear. It shall be the prize of the lady judged most beautiful of all at this tourney; and she shall be lady to that knight who gains the prize of valor and skill. These are the rules."

"Some piece of rubbish, eh, folks?" shouted Satyrane and grinned. Shea heard Britomart, next to him, mutter something about "No manners." The woodland knight completed his circuit and came to a stand near them. A squire passed up his helmet. From the opposite end of the lists a knight came forward, carrying a long slim lance, with which he lightly tapped Satyrane's shield. Then he rode back to his place.

"Do you know him?" asked Shea to make conversation.

"Nay, I ken him not," replied Britomart. "Some Saracen; see how his helmet ends in a spike and crescent peak and his shoulder plates flare outward."

The trumpet sounded again, two warning notes. The antagonists charged. There was a clang like a dozen dropped kettles. Bright splinters of wood flew as both spears broke. Neither man went down, but the Saracen's horse was staggering as he reached Shea's end of the lists and he himself reeling drunkenly in the saddle, clutching for support.

Satyrane was judged winner amid a patter of applause. Shea caught sight of Chalmers in the stands, shouting with the rest. Beside him was a heavily veiled woman, whose slender-bodiced figure in the tight gown implied good looks.

ANOTHER KNIGHT had taken his place at the opposite end of the lists. The crowd murmured.

"Blandamour of the Iron Arm," remarked Britomart, as the trumpet blew. Again came the rush and the *whang* of metal. This time Satyrane had aimed more shrewdly. Blandamour popped out of his saddle, lit on the horse's rump, and slid to the ground amid a shout of applause. Before he could be pulled aside another knight had taken his place. Satyrane rode him down, too, but came back from the encounter with his visor up, calling, "Givors!" and shaking his head as though to clear it.

A squire hurried past with a cup or wine. Britomar called at him: "Am I needed yet?"

"No, my lady," he replied. "Fer-

ramont is to ride the next run." Shea saw a little dark man with a black triangle on gold across his shield climb aboard his horse and take Satyrane's place. The pace of the jousting began to quicken. After Ferramont's second trip down the lists, two knights appeared at the opposite end. A page pushed past Shea calling for someone whose name sounded like "Sir Partybore" to join Ferramont for the defenders.

This time there was a double crash from the lists, which were getting dusty. Sir Partybore, or whatever his name was, went down. But he got up, clanked over to his horse, and pulled a big broadsword from the saddle bow. He waved it at the knight who had overthrown him, shouting something muffled in his helmet. The other turned back and dropped his broken lance. He drew a sword of his own, and aimed from the stirrups a blow that would have decapitated an elephant. The defender turned it easily with upraised shield. The man on foot and man on horseback circled each other, banging away with a frightful racket. Ferramont had downed another opponent in a cloud of dust, and new knights from either side were preparing to ride.

Shea turned to Britomart. "Aren't you going to get in?"

She smiled and shook her head. "These are the lesser knights of either side, good squire," she said. "You must know, good squire, that it is the custom of these tourneys for one or two knights of good report to ride at the beginning, as Satyrane has done for us and Blandamour for them. After that, those younger men have their opportunity to gain reputation, while such as we of the companions remain aside until needed."

Shea was about to ask who chose the sides. But Britomart gripped his arm. "Ha! Look! With the gyronny of black and silver."

At the other end of the lists Shea saw a big blond man ducking into a helmet. His shield bore a design of alternating black and silver triangles all running to the same point, which must be "gyrony." "That is Sir Cambell and none other," continued Britomart impressively.

As BRITOMART spoke the big man came storming into the press. One of the lesser knights on foot, attempting to stop him, was knocked down like a ninepin, rolling over and over under the horse's hoofs. Shea hoped his skull had not been cracked.

Ferramont, who had secured another lance, was charging to meet Cambell. Just before black-and-gold and black-and-silver came together, Cambell dropped his own lance. With a single clean, flowing motion he ducked under the point of Ferramont's lance, snatched a mace from his side and dealt Ferramont a terrific backhand blow on the back of the head. Ferramont clanged heavily from his saddle, out cold. The stands were in a bedlam, Britomart shouting, "Well struck! Oh, well!" and shifting from foot to foot.

Nearby Shea saw Satyrane's face go grim and heard his visor clang shut as Cambell turned back into the mêlée, laying furiously about him with his mace and upsetting a knight at every stroke. Shouts warned him of Satyrane's approach. He turned to meet the chief defender and swerved his horse quickly, striking with his mace at the lance head. But Satyrane knew the answer to that. As the arm went up, he changed aim from Cambell's shield to his right shoulder. The long spear took him right at the joint and burst in a hundred shivering fragments.

Down went Campbell with the point sticking in his shoulder.

With a yell of delight the defenders threw themselves on Cambell to make him prisoner. The challengers, more numerous, ringed the fallen knight round and began to get him back. Those still mounted tilted against each other around the edges of the mêlée.

A trumpet blew sharply over the uproar. Shea saw a new contestant entering the arena on the side of the challengers. He was a big, burly man who had fantastically decked every joint in his armor with brass oak leaves and had a curled metal oak leaf for a crest. Without any other notice, he dropped a big lance into position and charged at Satyrane, who had just received a fresh weapon on his side of the lists. *Whang!* Satyrane's spear shivered, but the stranger's held. The chief defender was carried six feet beyond his horse's tail. He landed completely out. The stranger withdrew and then charged again. Down went another defender.

Britomart turned to Shea. "This is surely a man of much worship," she said, "and now I may enter. Do you watch me, good squire, and if I am unhorsed, you are to draw me from the press."

She was gone. The wounded Cambell, forgotten amid the tumult around this new champion, had been dragged to the security of the tents at the challengers' end of the lists. The press was now around Satyrane, who was trying groggily to get up.

A trumpet sounded behind Shea. He turned to see Britomart ready. Oakleaves heard it, too. He wheeled to meet her.

His lance shattered, but Britomart's held. Though he slipped part of its force by twisting so it skidded over his shoulder, his horse staggered. Oakleaves swayed in the saddle. Unable to regain his co-ordination, he came down with a clatter.

THE warrior girl turned at the end of the lists and came back, lifting a hand to acknowledge the hurricane of cheers. Another of the challengers had taken the place of the oak-leaf knight. Britomart laid her lance in rest to meet him.

Then a knight—Shea recognized Blandamour by the three crossed arrows on his shield and surcoat—detached himself from the mob around Satyrane. In two bounds his horse carried him to Britomart's side, partly behind her. Too late she heard the warning shout from the stands as he swung his sword in a quick arc. The blow caught her at the base of the helmet. Down she went. Blandamour leaped down after her, sword in hand. Somebody shrieked: "Foully done!" Shea found himself running toward the spot, dragging at the big sword.

Blandamour had swung up his sword for another blow at Britomart. He turned at Shea's approach and swung at this new adversary. Shea parried awkwardly with the big, clumsy blade, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Britomart had reached a knee and was yanking a mace from her belt.

Blandamour started another swing. "Can't do much with this overgrown poker," thought Shea. He was trying to get it round, when he got a violent blow on the side of the head. He reeled, eyes watering with pain. More to gain balance than to hit anything, he swung his sword round like a hammer thrower about to let go.

It caught Blandamour on the shoulder.

Shea felt the armor give before the impact. The man toppled with a

red spurt of blood. The world was filled with a terrific blast of trumpets. Men-at-arms with halberds were separating the contestants. Britomart snapped up her visor and pointed to a man in armor at her feet, jerking like a headless chicken.

"A favor for a favor," she remarked. "This faitour knave struck you from behind and was about to repeat the blow when my mace caught him." She noticed that the groveling man's surcoat bore the green bars of Sir Paridell. "Yet still I owe you thanks, good squire. Without your aid I might have been sped by that foul cowardly blow that Blandamour struck."

"Don't mention it, said Shea. "Are we taking time out for lunch?"

"Nay, the tournament is ended."

Shea looked up and was dumfounded to see how much of the day had gone. The herald who had opened the proceedings had ridden across to the booth where the judge of the tournament sat. Now he blew a couple of toots, and cried in his high voice:

"It is judged that the most honor of this tournament has been gained by that noble and puissant lady, the Princess Britomart." There was a shout of approval. "But it is also judged that the knight of the oak leaves has shown himself a very worthy lord and he also shall receive a chaplet of laurel."

But when Britomart stepped up to the judge's stand, the knight of the oak leaves was nowhere to be found.

VII.

THE STANDS emptied slowly, like those at a football game. Some spectators hooted after Blandamour and Paridell as they were helped out. Shea caught a glimpse of Chalmers, hurrying after the veiled girl who had been his neighbor in the stands.

She moved slowly, with long, graceful strides, and he caught up to her at the entrance to the castle. Someone, hurrying past, bumped them into each other. A pair of intense eyes regarded Chalmers over the low face veil.

"It is the good palmer. Hail, reverend sir," she said in a toneless voice.

"Ahem," said Chalmers, struggling to find something to say. "Isn't it uh . . unusual for a woman to . uh . win a tournament?"

"Ywis, that it is." The voice was toneless still. Chalmers feared he had managed things badly. But she walked by his side down the great hall till a blast of warmth came from a fireplace where a serving man had just started a blaze.

"The heat!" she gasped. "Bear it I cannot! Get me to air, holy sir!"

She reeled against the psychologist's arm. He supported her to a casemented window, where she leaned back among the cushions, drawing in deep breaths. The features outlined against the thin veil were regular and fine; the eyes almost closed.

Twice Chalmers opened his mouth to speak to this singularly abstracted girl. Twice he closed it again. He could think of nothing to say but: "Nice weather, isn't it?" or "What's your name?" Both remarks struck him as not only inadequate, but absurd. He looked at his knobby knuckles with the feeling of being attached to a set of hands and feet seven times too big for him. He felt an utter fool in his drab gown and phony air of piety.

Dr. Reed Chalmers, though he did not recognize the sensations, was falling in love.

The girl's eyelids fluttered. She turned her head and gave him a long, slow look. He squirmed again. Then his professional sense awoke under that intent gaze. *Something* was the matter with her.

Certainly she was not feeble-minded. She must be acting under some sort of compulsion—posthypnotic suggestion, perhaps— Magic! He leaned forward, and was nearly knocked from his seat by a violent clap on the back.

"Good fortune, palmer!" cried a raucous voice. The dark Blandamour stepped past him, one arm bound tightly to his side. "Gramercy for your care of my little rosebud!" With the undamaged arm, he swung the girl expertly from her place in the casement and kissed her with a vigor that left a damp spot on her veil.

Chalmers shuddered internally. The girl submitted with the same air of preoccupation. She sank back into the casement. Chalmers meditated on a suitably horrible end for this jolly roughneck. Something humorous and lingering, with either boiling oil or melted lead.

"Hi, doc, how are we doing?" It was Shea. "Hi, Sir Blandamour. No hard feelings, I hope?"

The knight's black eyebrows came down like awnings. "Against you, you kern?" he roared. "Nay, I'll give you a meeting beyond the castle gate and spank you with the flat o' my blade."

Shea looked down his long nose and pointed toward Blandamour's bandaged shoulder. "Be careful that iron arm of yours doesn't get rusty before you go that far," he remarked. He turned to Chalmers. "Come on, doc, we got some reserved seats for the beauty parade. They're starting now."

As THEY left, Chalmers said: "Harold, I wish I could talk to that girl . . uh in private. I believe she's the . . uh key to what we're looking for."

Shea said: "Honest? She's Blandamour's lady, isn't she? I suppose if I fought him for her and beat him, she'd be mine."

"No, no, Harold, I implore you not to start any more fights. Our superiority over these people should be based on . uh intellectual considerations."

"O. K. It's funny, though, the way they pass women around like bottles of booze. And the women don't seem to mind."

"Custom," remarked Chalmers. "Beyond that, deep-rooted psychology. The rules are different from those we're accustomed to, but they're strict enough. A knight's lady is evidently expected to be faithful to him until he loses her."

"Still," Shea persisted, "if I had a lady, I'm not sure I'd want to enter her in this beauty contest, knowing she'd be turned over to the winner of the tournament."

"Custom again. It's not considered sporting to hold out on the other knights by refusing to risk an attractive lady."

They had been bowed into a kind of throne room with a raised dais at one end. At one side of the dais the bearish Satyrane sprawled in a comfortable chair. Six musicians with tootle-pipes and things like long-stemmed ukuleles were setting up a racket unlike any music Shea and Chalmers had ever heard. The knights and ladies appeared to find it charming, however. They listened with expressions of ecstasy till it squeaked and plunked to a close.

Satyrane stood up, the famous girdle dangling from his hand. "All ye folks know," he said, "that this is a

tournament of love and beauty as well as a garboil. This here girdle goes to the winning lady. It used to be Florimel's, but she lost it and nobody knows where she is, so it's finders keepers."

He paused and looked around. "Now, what I want to say is that this here is a very useful little collop of jewelry, both for the lady and her knight. It has a double enchantment on it. For the lady, it makes her ten times fairer the minute she puts it on, and it hides her from anyone who would do her wrong. But, also, it won't stay around the waist of any wench who's not perfectly chaste and pure. That's for the benefit of the knight. The minute his lady can't keep her belt on he knows she's been up to tricks." He ended with a bellowing laugh. A few echoed it. Others murmured at his uncouthness.

Satyrane waved for quiet and went on. "Now, as to who wi , the honorable judges have eliminated the contestants down to four, but among the claims of these four they say they can't decide nohow. So they ask, lords and ladies, that you yourselves choose." Satyrane turned to the opposite side of the dais where four women sat, with veils over their heads, and called: "Duessa! Lady to Sir Paridell."

One of the girls rose and advanced to the front of the dais. Satyrane removed her veil. Her hair was a red almost as bright as her heavily rouged lips. Eyebrows slanted low at the center. She looked a queenly, disdainful scorn at the audience. The company murmured its appreciation. Satyrane stepped back a pace and called: "Cambina! Lady and wife to Sir Cambell."

She came forward slowly—blond, almost as tall as Cambell himself, and of the mature, Junoesque beauty, she dwarfed without outshining the fiery little redhead.

Shea whispered to Chalmers: "A little bit too well upholstered for me."

Just then there was a clang as an iron-glove was thrown on the floor. Cambell's deep voice boomed, "My challenge to any who tries to take her from me!"

There was no acceptance. Satyrane never turned a hair. He whipped off the next veil, crying: "The Lady Amoret!" She stepped forward bravely, turning her head to show the perfect profile, but as Satyrane announced, "Lady and wife of Sir Scudamour," the delicate nostrils twitched. They gave an audible sniffle. Then, abandoning all efforts at self-control, she burst into a torrent of tears for the absent Scudamour. The Lady Duessa looked angry contempt. Cambina tried to comfort her as the sobs became louder and louder, mixed with words about, "—when I think of all I've been through for him—" Satyrane threw up his hands despairingly and stepped back to the fourth contestant.

"Sir Blandamour's lady, Florimel!" he announced, and drew the veil from the woman with whom Chalmers had been talking. Shea heard Chalmers gasp. The girl who advanced to the front of the dais with a sleepwalker's step and wide eyes was the most beautiful thing Shea had ever seen. Clapping and murmurs foretold who would win.

But there was a buzz of talk as well. Shea's ear caught Britomart's remark to Chalmers: "Good palmer! You who are skilled in magic and supersticerie, mark her well!"

"Why why, Miss Britomart?"

"Because there's something here

very strange. She's as like that Florimel of the Sea to whom the girdle really belongs as one pea to another. Yet I will swear it is not the same woman, and see!—all here are of the same mind."

In truth the hall was shouting for Florimel as the winner, but they were shouting for "Blandamour's Florimel," as though to distinguish her from the true owner of the girdle. Satyrane bowed and extended the jeweled trinket toward her.

With a word of thanks she took the belt. She clasped it around her middle. There seemed to be some difficulty about buckling it. She fumbled, worked at it a second, snapped it tight, lifted her hands—and the enchanted belt, still buckled, slid down her hips and thumped on the floor.

A LOW MURMUR of laughter ran around the room. Everyone looked at Blandamour, who turned beet-color. Florimel stepped out of the circle of the belt and picked it up, a frown of puzzlement on her perfect features.

"Here, let *me* put it on," said the red-haired Duessa, and snatching it, suited the action to the word. As soon as she clasped it, the girdle popped open and slid down. She caught it and tried again. Same result. Shea noticed her lips were moving as though pronouncing a charm.

"At least, *I* can do it," said Cambina, and Duessa threw the belt at her angrily. But Cambina could not make the belt stay either. No more could the others, as they tried one after another. With each effort the knights' jokes grew louder and more barbed. Satyrane looked worried. Shea sympathized with him. This backwoods knight had tried so hard to give a polite party. Blandamour had ruined one with his back blow at Britomart, while the girdle was ruining the other.

But Satyrane was not done yet. "Ladies!" he shouted. "Cease, I pray you! The rules of the contest only provide that this girdle should go to the winner with nothing about her trying it on. That's Florimel, and she is now the lady of the winner of the tournament, who is—by the seven thousand virgins of Cologne, it's the Princess Britomart!"

The tall blonde stepped forward and said something to Satyrane, then turned to the company. "I do refuse this gift," she said, "since I am sworn to accompany Amoret till she finds her Scudamour."

Chalmers whispered: "Harold, I've simply got to talk to that girl. For . . . uh scientific reasons. Couldn't you persuade Britomart to accept her for—"

"I say to me!" Blandamour's shout drowned every other sound. "If the winner won't have her, then she's mine again by right of reversion!" Satyrane, scratching his head, was the middle of a knot of knights.

"Assotishness!" shouted Sir Cambell. "If the winner won't have her, then she reverts to the champion of the other side and, marry, that am I!"

"I overthrew more knights than you today," cried Sir Ferramont. "If it comes to a question of the second best—"

Britomart cut in icily: "Good knights and gentles, I have changed my mind and will accept the charge of this lady."

"By my halidome, no!" bellowed Blandamour. "You refused her once, and she's mine!"

"Hey," Shea put in. "Didn't I knock you for a loop this morning? Then doesn't that—"

Blandamour spat. "That for you,

springald! Pox on these legal points! I'm on my way!" He strode across the room, grabbed Florimel's wrist, and dragged her after him, snarling something inaudible through his mustache. Florimel whimpered with pain.

Shea bounded after them, spun Blandamour round and slapped his face. He jumped back and got the épée out just in time.

"Stop, fair sirs!" wailed Satyrane. The clash of steel answered him. His guests scattered, pushing furniture back. To them, stopping a good fight would be wicked waste of entertainment.

Shea remembered that in dealing with these broadsword men, you had to rely on footwork. If they got close enough for a good swing, you might get your blade snapped on a parry. He felt rather than saw the approach of a corner, and drove in a stop thrust to keep from being backed into it. He heard a voice: "Nay, bid them cease. Blandamour uses but one arm."

"So does the other," came the answer, "and he has the lighter blade. Let them go."

Back and forth they went, *swish, clang, tzing!* Shea caught a ferocious backhand cut with a parry sixte, but his light blade was borne back by the force of the blow. The edge chopped through the sleeve of his jacket and barely nicked the skin. Blandamour laughed. Shea, thinking fast, grunted as if with pain, jumped back and dropped his épée. But he caught it with his left hand and, as Blandamour came hurling in, nailed him just above the knee. The knight's blade whistled round and clipped the tip off Shea's hat feather before Blandamour crashed to the floor on the stabbed leg.

"Enough!" shouted Satyrane, jumping between them. "Let there be an end of manslaying! Now I rule that Sir Blandamour has his just deserts for unknightly behavior, both here and at the tourney. Let any who challenge this prove it on me! Squire Harold, ye have won Florimel for your lawful paramour— Why, pest take it, where is she?"

Florimel, the fair bone of thi knightly contention, had disappeared.

VIII.

SHEA SAID: "I get sick of the flatness of this country. And doesn't it ever rain?" He sat on the white gelding he had purchased at Castle Caultrock, the armor that had been Sir Paridell's bundled up behind him. He had tried wearing it, but the heat was unbearable.

Chalmers was just taking his bearings with a crude jackstave he and Shea had managed to patch together. He remarked: "Harold, you're an incorrigible varietist. If we had cliffs and a downpour, you'd doubtless complain about that."

Shea grinned. "Touché, doc. Only I get bored. I'd even welcome a lion for the sake of excitement."

Chalmers climbed back onto the ass. "Giddap, Gustavus," he said, and then: "I daresay you'll have plenty of excitement if this wood harbors as many enchanters as they say. I rather wish you wouldn't challenge all the . uh hard characters we encounter on the strength of your ability to fence."

"Well, what the hell, I've gotten away with it so far."

"Undoubtedly. At the same time it is just as well not to carry matters too far. I should hate to be left alone."

"A nasty, selfish point of view. Say, doc, it's too bad the girls

wouldn't come with us.' That ebony spear of Britomart's gave me a feeling of solid comfort."

"You're not acquiring a . . . uh . sentimental fondness for that brawny lady?"

"Good Lord, no! I was just giving her practice in the theory and practice of feminine charm, for snaring her own boy friend. But, say, if anybody's loopy over a girl it's you! I saw the look on your face when Satyrane suggested Florimel had been carried off by enchantment."

"Why ahem nothing of the sort . . that is, very well." Chalmers looked worried. "The trouble with traveling with a fellow psychologist is that concealments are impossible. However, I will say that Florimel's manner gave me to pause. When the girdle refused to stay on anyone, I became certain of the operation of magic. The laws of probability should have produced at least one faithful lady among so many." Chalmers gave a sigh. "I suppose Florimel was just an illusion. It was fortunate in a way. It gave us a good excuse to ask how to find an enchanter. Otherwise they might have suspected us of trying uh . . to make common cause with their enemies. The Faerie knights seem convinced that all enchanters are working against them. Perhaps they are right."

They rode in silence for a while. Then Shea said: "Looks like the woods begins about here." A little stream crossed the track in front of them, and beyond it the sparse timber gave place to dense forest. They dismounted, tying up Gustavus and the horse, which had been christened Adolphus, and produced their lunch.

Both munched in silence for a moment. Then Chalmers said: "Harold, I wish you'd promise not to get into any more fights if—"

"Hey!" said Shea, and leaped to his feet.

Out from among the trees loped a pair of naked, hairy, seven-foot ape men. They had huge ears with tufts of hair sprouting from them, and throat pouches like orangutans. In their hands were clubs. For a moment they stood at gaze, then came splashing through the stream at a gallop.

Chalmers ran to untie the animals, but they were leaping about, crazy with fear. In a glance Shea decided he could never reach Sir Paridell's sword. He would have to use the épée, feeble as that toothpick was against those huge clubs.

The first of the ape men ran at him, bellowing. Shea never knew whether he had gained his senses or lost his nerve, but the next instant he and Chalmers were running round and round the tethered animals, with the ape men foaming through their tusks behind.

One of the creatures boomed something to the other. On the next circuit the fugitives were surprised to run head-on into one ape man who had stopped and waited for them. Shea was in front. He saw the club swing up in two hairy hands and did the only thing possible—extend the épée and fling himself forward in a terrific flèche.

His face was buried in fur and he was clutching at it for support. The hilt was wrenched from his hand, and the animal man went screaming off, with the weapon sticking through him. He himself was running; over his shoulder, he saw Chalmers was running, with the other ape man gaining, twirling up his club for the blow. Shea had an instant of horror—the poor old doc,

Chalmers broke off his incantation with a howl and leaped back. The dragon was arriving—

to pass out this way, when he couldn't help—

Thunk!

The feathered butt of an arrow appeared in the thing's side, as though it had just sprouted there. The club missed Chalmers as the creature staggered and turned. *Thunk!* The second arrow took it in the throat, and it collapsed in a clump of bracken, screeching and thrashing. Shea tried to stop; Chalmers careened into him and they went down together.

Shea sat up and wiped leaf mold from his face. Footsteps preceded a tallish, slim girl in a short-skirted tunic and soft leather boots. She had a bow in one hand and a light boar spear in the other, and she moved toward them at a springy trot as though it were her normal gait. A feathered hat like Shea's sat on her red-gold hair, which was trimmed in a long bob.

Shea got up. "Thanks, young lady. We owe you a life or two. I think the thing's about dead."

"I'll make certain. Those Losels are hard to kill," said the girl. She stepped to the bracken and jabbed. She seemed satisfied as she pulled the spear out, wiping its point on some moss. "Is the old man hurt?"

Chalmers gained breath enough to sit up. "Just *puff* . . winded. I am . . . uh . merely middle-aged. To whom do we owe our rescue?"

The girl's eyebrows went up, Shea noticing they were a delightful color. "You know me not? I hight Belphebe."

"Well," said Shea, "I . . ah . . hight Harold Shea, esquire, and my friend hight Reed Chalmers, the palmer, if that's how you say it."

"That would be your blade sticking in the other Losel?"

"Yes. What happened to it?"

"I will even show you. The creature died when erst I saw it."

Losels. Shea recalled the table at Castle Caultrock, with Britomart telling Sir Erivan he would not find it easy to come to grips with Busyrane, the enchanter, because his castle was "in the wood where the Losels breed."

"We're on the right track, doc," he said to Chalmers as he helped the latter up and followed Belphebe.

Chalmers merely gave him a sidelong glance and sang softly:

"But when away his regiment ran,
His place was at the fore, oh,
That celebrated, cultivated, underrated nobleman,
The Duke of Plaza-Toro!"

Shea grinned. "Meaning me, I suppose? I was just setting a pace for you. Here's our other Losel." He pulled the épée from the repellent corpse.

Belphebe gazed at it with interest. "Marry, a strange weapon. May I try its balance?" Shea showed her how to hold the épée and made a few lunges, enjoying to the full his first chance to show off before an attractive girl. Belphebe tried. *"Ouch!* These poses of yours are as awkward as a Mussulman at the Mass, Squire Harold." She laughed and tossed the épée back to him. "Will you show me more another day?"

Chalmers broke in. "Ahem could you tell us where there are any . . . uh . . . magicians to be found?"

Shea frowned. Belphebe's face changed. "Now wherefore would you know that?"

"We're trying to rescue somebody we think they have, and we thought if we could . uh gain the confidence of one—"

"Meseems that is a strange and not well-thought-of plan," said the girl a bit coolly. "Yet, since you wish, straight on, and I warrant me

you'll find enough of the naughty rogues." She waved her hand. "And now, good gentles, if you will even pardon me, I must trim the ears from this—"

"You must *what?*" demanded Shea.

"Trim the ears from this Losel. For trophies. Already I have pairs an hundred and twenty and two. Good morrow, gentles."

"THAT," said Shea, when they were on their way, "is my idea of a real girl. And you had to put her off us with that crack about magicians!"

"Very fine girl, provided she doesn't put an arrow through you and cut off your ears for trophies. I confess my taste runs to a somewhat more sedentary type of female—" Chalmers' voice trailed off unhappily. "I'm afraid I wasn't cut out for this type of life, Harold. If it were not for pure scientific interest in the problems—"

"Aw, cheer up, doc. Say, by the way, how's your magic coming along? A few good spells would help more than all the hardware put together."

Chalmers brightened perceptibly. "Well, now ahem I think I may claim some progress. There was that business of the cat that flew away. I find I can levitate small objects without difficulty and have had much success in conjuring up mice. In fact, I fear I left quite a plague of them in Satyrane's castle. But I took care to conjure up a similar number of cats, so perhaps conditions will not be too bad."

"Yes, but what about the general principles?"

"Well, the laws of similiarity and contagion hold. They appear to be the fundamental principles, the Newton's laws of motion, in the field of magic. Obviously the next step is to discover a system of mathematics arising from these fundamentals. I was afraid I would have to invent my own, as Einstein was forced to adapt tensor analysis to handle his relativity equations. But I think I have discovered such a system ready made, in the calculus of classes, which is a branch of symbolic logic. There is— Stop that animal of yours a moment and I'll show you."

Chalmers fished through his garments for writing matterials. "As you know, one of the fundamental equations of class calculus is this:

$$\vdash \alpha + \sim \alpha = I$$

"That is, the class alpha plus the class nonalpha equals the universe. But in magic the equation appears to be:

$$\vdash I \subset \alpha + \sim \alpha$$

"The class alpha plus the class nonalpha *includes* the universe. But it may or may not be limited thereto. The reason seems to be that in magic one deals with a plurality of universes. Magic thus does not violate the law of conservation of energy. It operates along interuniversal vectors, perpendicular, in a sense, to the spatial and temporal dimensions. It can draw on the energy of another and invisible universe for its effects.

"Evidently, one may readily have the case of two magicians, each summoning energy from some universe external to the current one, for diametrically opposite purposes. Thus it must have been obvious to you that the charming Lady Duessa—somewhat of a vixen, I fear—was attempting to operate an enchantment of her own to overcome that of the girdle. That she was unable to do

so— Merciful heavens! What's that?"

"That" was a big black leopard which leaped out suddenly into their path. It snarled with the sound of tearing sheet iron. The mounts bucked and started to whirl against the bits.

"Stop, doc!" yelled Shea, manhandling Adolphus around and reaching behind him for the broadsword. "If you run, it'll jump you sure!"

He tumbled off, snubbed his reins around a convenient stump, and faced the leopard with the broadsword in one hand and the épée i the other. "If I stand my ground," he thought, "it probably won't attack, but if it does—" There was a book he had read once—what was its name? If it springs, impale it with the épée; if it stands off and claws, chop with the broadsword—

The leopard snarled again. It seemed uncertain. Then, to Shea's astonishment, it swelled and changed into a huge lion. He felt a prick of fear. A man might handle a 150-pound leopard, but a 600-pound lion —not even a mortal stab would keep it from ripping him up, once it got to close quarters. He was in for it—

"Harold!" Chalmers' voice was not too near. "It's all right."

"The hell it's all right!" thought Shea, holding his ground for want of anything better to do.

THE LION did not spring. Instead it grimaced. The fanged mouth became a beak, wings sprouted from its shoulders, and it was a griffin. That, Shea realized, was not kosher; griffins did not—

Chalmers called, closer, "It's the man we're looking for."

Shea relaxed. "Take off the false whiskers, Mr. Magician; we know you," he said. The griffin began to dwindle and dissolve. Shea turned to Chalmers, who was struggling with a patently balky Gustavus. "Didn't you say something about 'when his regiment ran, his place was in the fore, oh—' "

"I couldn't control this confounded beat. And it's '*at* the fore, oh,' not *in*. How do you do, sir?" This was to the ex-griffin, which had become a stout, dark, bald man, who stood glowering at them, fists on hips.

"I do right well," said the man. "What do you two here? Eh? Seek trouble? You've come to the right market."

Shea grinned. "In a way, I suppose we are, if you call yourself trouble."

"Ho, you seek my professional service! I warn you I handle no minor matters, like turning cows sour or the manufacture of love philters. That's witch-wife work. I'm a master magician."

"Then we're delighted—"

"Ahem," said Chalmers. "Excuse me, Harold. I should like to explain to the gentleman that our interest is professional, looking to an exchange of information that might be mutually profitable."

"Ho!" cried the enchanter. "You two claim to be magicians? How do I know you speak sooth? Tell me that, eh?"

"Well uh—"

"Work a spell for him, doc," said Shea.

"Oh, dear me. I don't suppose he'd be satisfied with more mice—or cats. All I can think of now is one I prepared for conjuring up a dragon."

"What the hell, that's fine! Go ahead with your dragon!"

The magician's ears caught the last word. "Dragon? D'you think you can really produce a dragon? Let's see you do it!"

"But won't it be . . . uh . . . dangerous?" This was Chalmers.

"Have no fear. I'll get a counterspell ready. Grantorto protects you. *The* Grantorto." He strutted.

"Show him, doc."

Chalmers, with a look of baffled and apprehensive resignation, began to make a list of the properties needed. A small red salamander was discovered under a stone. Most of the other things they had already, but a snapdragon plant was called for, and there was none in sight. "Conjure one up," said Shea, coolly. The harassed psychologist looked annoyed. But, with the aid of a roadside weed, he produced a snapdragon plant the size of a tree. *The* Grantorto snorted.

Chalmers laid out his properties, lit a fire with flint and steel and began an incantation:

"By Fafnir and Hydra,
Apophis and Yang:
With the length of Nidhöggr,
Tiámat's sharp fang,
The shape of the lizard,
The strength of the bear,
Thou, scaled like the serpent,
Emerge from your lair!
Steed of Triptolemus,
Beowulf's bane,
Symbzol of Uther,
And bringer of rain—"

Shea prudently hitched the animals' reins around a tree. If the dragon turned out to be winged and hungry— He wished that his damned reckless impulsiveness had not made him force Chalmers' hand. If *the* Grantorto's counterspell didn't work—

The oyster-colored smoke of the fire thickened and darkened. Chalmers bit off his chant in mid-stanza and scrambled back. A reptilian head a yard long was poking toward them out of the smoke.

The head had a scaly neck behind it. Then came a foreleg and another. The dragon seemed to be crawling from nothingness through an orifice somewhere in the smoke, ballooning out as it came. There it was, complete to stinger-tipped tail, gazing at them with yellow cat's eyes.

Shea breathed, not daring to attract its attention by a movement: "If it starts for us, doc, you get on Gustavus and I'll let go the reins."

Grantorto's face was twisting as though he had swallowed too big a mouthful. The dragon lurched a few steps, not toward them but off at right angles, opened its terrible mouth, gave a whistling *"beeep!"* and began to crop the grass contentedly.

"God bless my soul!" said Chalmers.

"He'd better," replied Shea. "Look!"

A SECOND *draconian* head was pushed through the smoke. This one was squirted out in a few seconds. It looked at the three men, then wandered over to a clump of bright-colored flowers, sniffed, and began to eat them. Now a third and a fourth head were already in sight. As fast as the dragons were extruded, more followed them. The field down to the very confines of the trees was crowded with them, new arrivals butting the others to make room or scratching their sides on trees. Shea was counting: "Thirty-three, thirty-four— We better untie the animals and move or we'll get stepped on. Thirty-six, thirty-seven—"

"Dear me," remarked Chalmers, fingering his chin, as they backed among the trees. "I rather feared this. The same thing happened with the mice."

"Fifty-two, fifty-three—" Shea continued. "My God, the country will be overrun with them!"

Dragons had overflowed the field and were lurching through the trees with their ungainly gait, munching everything green in sight, mooing at each other with the same plaintive beeping sound. "Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. Oh, boy!"

The fire suddenly died and the cascade of vegetarian dragons ceased. "My God," said Shea in an awe-struck voice. "One hundred reptilian Ferdinands!"

Grantorto's voice was that of a man somewhat shaken. "Forsooth, you do things not by halves. Though I mind me I once succeeded with a bushel measure full of pearls. Now tell me, fellow magician, was it not by error you got eaters of grass? Eh? No secrets in the trade."

"Ahem. No use taking unnecessary risks," said Chalmers, still looking a trifle wall-eyed.

"Doubtless," remarked Grantorto with a glance that Shea just barely saw, "you can exorcise them as rapidly."

"We could," said Shea, before his companion had a chance to answer. "For the dragon-disappearing spell, though, we need an aneroid comptometer, and we lost ours. Do you have one with you?"

"An . ah, certes, an ameroid combompeter. Nay, I fear me not so. Last spring came a black frost that killed all the plants on which ameroid combompeters grow." He spread his hands regretfully. "However, meseems these dragons will in the long run be a benefit, making rare good sport and food for our friends and servants, the Losels. And now, sir magicians whom I have not seen, explain your purpose in Loselwood."

Chalmers spoke. "Uh . . . we're looking for a lady named Florimel, and were advised we might find her here. Do you know the young person?"

Grantorto chuckled. "The real Florimel or the false?"

"The real or— The one who was at Satyrane's tournament recently."

"That would be the false one, made by the Witch of Riphoea. A fair piece of work—though I will say I care not much for these witches. Duessa is the only one who has any standing in the Chapter— And that brings me to remark, magical sirs, are you members of one of the outland Chapters? My memory is practically infallible, and I do not recall having seen you at our meetings."

Chalmers stammered: "We . . uh . . that is . . can you tell me a little more about this Florimel? The uh false one."

Grantorto waved his hand. "A mere witch's thing—a creature made of snow, of no special value. You must let me show you the really fine chess player *I* made sometime, or the imps I conjured up to handle my torture work. Really an achievement. Busyrane, our archmagician, doubtless called this false Florimel in for inspection." He accented the last word and snickered. "But you haven't answered my question, magical sirs."

Shea spoke up boldly. "The point is, we'd like to join up with you."

"You mean you have been working independently and we knew it not?" Grantorto narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Aye; Busyrane opened the Chapter but a twelvemonth ago and you may well have slipped his attention. I trust you have not refused his invitation. Our Archimage is not soft or slow with unlicensed magicians. He has a spell that turns 'em into spiders. Witty, is he not, eh?"

"Good gracious!" said Chalmers.

"But how does one acquire a license?"

"That falls somewhat upon the applicant. Our charter calls for a round twenty-one master magicians, the magic number. Naturally, you behold in me one of the leading masters, whether by ability or seniority. There is also a class of journeymen, who handle the ordinary work, and one of apprentices. Perhaps you have talent enough to be elected to mastership. There are three or four places unfilled, I believe. The next meeting comes in five days, and with my backing your election would be certain."

IX.

GRANTORTO, in the form of a handsome stallion, trotted in front. Shea leaned back in his saddle and, watching the stallion's ears carefully, murmured: "Doing all right, aren't we, doc?"

"I suppose so, but I admit to being somewhat apprehensive as to what will happen if both the companions and the Chapter of Magicians learn we've been co-operating with the other party. This . . ah . . . playing both ends against the middle may get us in trouble."

"Maybe," said Shea. They rode on in silence.

Once a tiger glided out from between the trunks ahead. Gustavus and Adolphus, both rapidly approaching nervous breakdowns, tried to bolt from the trail. Grantorto turned himself from a stallion into an immense buffalo. The tiger slunk off, snarling.

The sun was already low when the trail made a right-angled bend and dipped under a bank. A huge oak door was set into the earth. Grantorto, again in his natural form, waved a hand, and the door flew open. "Fear not for the safety of your mounts," he said. "An invisible wall, which none may penetrate without my let, surrounds this place."

Shea, dismounting, said: "That ought to be nice for keeping the mosquitoes out."

Grantorto laughed dutifully, then shook his head. "Ah, good 'prentice, how true! Is it not sad that a man of genius must concern himself with petty moils and worries?"

The air was stuffy inside. The first thing Shea saw was a huge pile of dirty dishes. Grantorto was evidently not the neat type of bachelor. Beyond was an object that made his scalp prickle. It was the life-sized nude statue of a young man, stiff, at one side of the room, emitting a faint bluish glow. It held aloft a torch, which Grantorto set alight.

The enchanter noticed Shea's glance of inquiry. "A former 'prentice of mine," he remarked. "I found he was a spy from Queen Gloriana's court, where a few of those high-born grandees practice a kind of magic they call 'white.' So there he stands, with all his sensations alive and the rest of him dead. Eh, Roger?" He pinched the statue playfully and laughed. "I'm really the best humorist in the Chapter when I'm in the mood. Let me show you my collection of Mallamies."

"What's a Mallamy?" inquired Chalmers.

Grantorto looked at him hard, then decided it was a kind of joke and laughed. He began taking bottles off a shelf and holding them up to the light. Each contained a human figure about an inch tall. "Homunculi from the hand of great master, Mallamy himself," he explained. "He specialized in this art, and none other has been able to shrink folk to so small size. Even

I, Grantorto, cannot equal his art. This is the finest collection of his figures in existence. It wants only a blond Saracen. Busyrane has one, but he will not yield it, though I have offered him a water fay, which his own collection lacks. He insists that water fays are not permanent, since any accident will bring water in contact with the bottle and they can work a spell of their own and so escape."

He sighed. "You see how things fall short of perfection even for the greatest of us. But come in, good sirs, and seat yourselves in my cabinet. Only 'ware the cockatrice as you go down this passage."

"A cockatrice?" said Shea.

"Aye. A rare, priceless idea of Busyrane's. All masters of the Chapter are supplied with them. They are just outside our inner cabinets and under an enchantment, so they may not look on any member of the Chapter—or his friends. But should any of Gloriana's people essay to enter, the cockatrice looks on them and they turn to stone."

GRANTORTO threw open a door and led the way down a dimly lighted passage. Behind bars at one side the beast stalked to and fro with a clatter of its scaly tail. It turned its head this way and that. The stench made Shea want to vomit. Over his shoulder he saw Chalmers' lips moving. He hoped it was with a protective counterspell, not prayer. Grantorto's voice floated back: "—had to get them after Cambina, one of those 'white magic' practitioners, got into Mallamy's cabinet and drowned him in a pool of alkahest. Thank Lucifer, she married that oaf, Sir Cambell, and marriage cost her some of her powers—"

The door banged behind them. Shea gasped for air as though he had swum up from the bottom of the ocean.

The table was ready and the food—thank Heaven, thought Shea—not too highly spiced. Whittling at a steak, he asked: "What's this meat? It's good!"

"Fried Losel," said the magician calmly.

Shea saw Chalmers halt a mouthful in midair. He felt himself gag momentarily; it was, after all, on the borderline of cannibalism, and after the cockatrice— He forced himself to go on eating. Squeamishness right now was a luxury.

Grantorto poured out some wine, sat back, and rather to the travelers' astonishment produced and lit a clay pipe.

"Aye," he pronounced, "competition is the curse of our business. One playing against another, and those curst companions of Gloriana making sad work of us all—that's how matters stood till Busyrane organized our Chapter. Why, I mind me, I had a very good thing once, very good. Found a man of property who wanted a love philter. I made it for him, and he refused to pay. As he was more ass than human, I promised him his ears should grow an inch a day, with the price doubled for each inch they grew till he got me to take the spell off." Grantorto laughed and puffed. "I told you I was a good deal of a humorist.

"Well, what does he do but go to Malingo, who gives him a counterspell at half price! No more of that now."

Shea had a question: "Look here. If you magicians all co-operate so well, what went wrong at Satyrane's tournament? That girdle wouldn't stay on the false Florimel, or on Duessa either for that matter. I should've thought Busyrane would see to that."

Grantorto chuckled. "Briskly questioned, springald! The trick with the girdle was doubtless Duessa's doing. It's in her style. She tried to remove the enchantment already on it, but when she found she couldn't do that, clapped another atop, so 'twould fit nobody. But Florimel's case was an error, I fear me much." He shook his head. "Especially if in good sooth Busyrane has sent for her. Nothing would gall those high knights and ladies of the court half as much as having one of their queens of beauty, approved chaste by the test of the girdle, to live with an enchanter. But now, alack, there's a doubt."

Shea saw Chalmers start and run his tongue around his lips at the mention of the connection between Busyrane and Florimel. He pressed questions about the Chapter to give Chalmers a chance to recover. But now Grantorto shut up like a clam, with suspicious glances. Shea had uneasy memories of the cockatrice and the spy in the outer room.

The magician finally rose. "'Tis time we retired, eh, magical sirs? 'Twere wise to set out for Busyrane's tomorrow. If we arrive ere the meeting be called, I'm sure that my connections and the skill in intrigue for which I'm known will enable me to secure your election."

A WHISPER: "Hey, doc, you asleep?"

Another: "Merciful heavens, no. Not in this place. Is *he?*"

"If he isn't, that's a damned good magical snore. Say, can't we do something about that poor guy he made into a statue?"

"It would be injudicious to attempt it, Harold. Moreover, I'm not certain I know how. It would jeopardize our whole plan of campaign."

"Didn't know we had one. Are we stringing along with him?"

"I suppose we must if we really intend to help Queen Gloriana and the companions. I may also mention Florimel. Grantorto remarked that she was made of snow—created. I find it difficult to credit and rather awful. I fear we must join this Chapter and . uh . bore from within, as it were."

"I suppose," said Shea thoughtfully, "that the Chapter explains why the Land of Faerie is sort of running down."

"Yes. The enchanters had just discovered the—"

"Say, doc!" Shea's whisper was almost loud. "If the Chapter was formed a year ago, 'Faerie Queene' time, and it had already been started when Spenser wrote, which was four centuries ago, Earth time—Faerie time must be much slower than ours. If we go back, we'll land somewhere in the twenty-fifth century—along with Buck Rogers."

"*If* we go back. And also if the curvature of the spacetime vectors is uniform. There might be sine curves in the vectors, you know."

"Never thought of it. Say, how come your dragon spell was so excessively successful?"

Chalmers permitted himself an under-the-breath chuckle. "A property of the mathematics of magic. Since it's based on the calculus of classes, it is primarily qualitative, not quantitative. Hence the quantitative effects are indeterminate. You can't—at least, with my present skill I can't—locate the decimal point. Here the decimal point was too far rightward, and I got a hundred dragons instead of one. It might have been a thousand."

Shea lay still a moment digesting that thought. Then: "Can't you do something about that?"

"I don't know. Apparently the

professionals learn by experience just how much force to put into their incantations. It's an art rather than a science. If I could solve the quantitative problem, I could put magic on a scientific basis. I wish, Harold, that tomorrow you could . . uh . . manage to distract Grantorto for long enough to allow me to possess myself of one of his textbooks. His place is such a hurrah's nest that he's certain not to miss it."

X.

THE THREE riders—Grantorto had conjured up a horse because, he said, taking the form of one for a long journey would be fatiguing—had been going for miles through Loselwood. They saw deer, but no other living creatures. Conversation was scarce till they came out on a road, once wide and well graded, now much overgrown. Shea reasoned that this was one more sign of how the enchanters were getting the best of the Faerie knights.

He pushed his mount alongside the magician. "With your superlative powers, Grantorto, I wonder they didn't elect you head of the Chapter instead of Busyrane."

Grantorto shrugged. "I could have had the post at good cheap, ho-ho! But I would not strive and moil for it. I'm really a very good judge of human nature, so I arranged Busyrane's election, knowing he would do it well."

"You must be just about perfect," said Shea.

" 'Just about,' my 'prentice friend, is a weak phrase. I *am* perfect. I've no doubt that people in ages to come will date the history of true wizardry from my entry into the field."

"Modest, too," remarked Shea, drawing a quick glare from Chalmers.

Grantorto dropped his eyes. "Too modest, I sometimes think. Yet do I guard against such affectation—hola! Here's an encounter!" An armored horseman had appeared at the far end of the defile through which they were riding. His lance came down and he trotted toward them.

Grantorto cried: "Ten thousand devils, 'tis Artegall himself! Flee, or we are undone!" Looking a bit undone himself, the magician whirled his horse sharp round on its hind legs.

A woman's voice behind them called, "Stand, all of you!" Belphebe was perched on a rock at the side of the defile, covering them with bow bent full.

"To the air!" screeched Grantorto, the last word going beyond human pitch as he changed to hawk and flapped slanting upward. There was the flat snap of the bow, the whistle of the arrow, and there was a puff of feathers. Down hurtled the hawk, changing to Grantorto with an arrow through his arm as he fell. He landed, *plop*, in a soft spot. Shea observed that these people really knew something about swearing in the minute or two before Artegall's lance jabbed him.

"Dismount, runagates!" roared the knight. It seemed the best thing to do. The man was as big as Cambell, cased in steel, yet moved quickly. Besides, Belphebe had another arrow already nocked.

Artegall pushed up his visor to show a stern, swarthy face with a broken nose. He produced a couple of looped chains, which he slipped over the victims' heads, tightened, and locked. "You're in arrest," quoth he.

"What for?" asked Shea.

"For judgment by the high justice of the court of her majesty, Queen Gloriana."

Chalmers groaned. "The high justice," he explained in a low voice, "means the death penalty if we're found guilty."

"Then I'll take low," said Shea.

"You had better not ask it. He probably has the privilege of low justice himself, which means he can sentence you to about five years in prison right here. He probably would."

Belphebe had come down from her rock. "Grantorto, by the splendor of heaven!" she cried. "I bear witness, Sir Artegall, that when I met this pair in Loselwood but yesterday, they were asking after magicians. Guard the young one well; he bears a blade of much power, which I doubt not has some enchantment on it."

"Say you so!" observed Artegall, with an unpleasant expression. "By my halidome, we are well met, then. A pretty gift for the queen's justice! Let's 'see that 'little sword." He yanked Shea's baldric up over his head, nearly taking off an ear.

He climbed back on his horse, holding the end of the three chains. The prisoners had no choice but to trot along behind him.

Chalmers managed to whisper: "Don't try to tell them we're on the right side. Britomart will clear us if necessary. We must . . uh retain Grantorto's confidence."

They plodded on. The more Chalmers thought about it the less he liked the idea of being dragged off to the Faerie court for judgment. If they were released with Britomart's help, any enchanters they met afterward might reasonably ask them how they came to escape when Grantorto was condemned. Of the master magician's condemnation there could be little doubt. Artegall looked at him with pure detestation. Belphebe, trotting along beside them, was amusing herself by catching the enchanter's eye, putting one hand around her neck, and making strangling sounds. The great Grantorto did not seem to be enjoying it.

SHEA? Shea was admiring Belphebe's springy stride. Anything Chalmers did would have to be on his own. Fortunately, Chalmers had succeeded in purloining and sneaking a look into one of Grantorto's textbooks that morning. There was a simple weakness spell in it; not much of a spell, lasting only a few hours and easily guarded against if one knew it were coming. But it required no apparatus beyond twelve blades of grass, a small piece of paper, and some water.

Chalmers stooped and pulled up the grass blades as he stumbled along, holding them in his mouth as though he merely wanted something to chew on. He slipped a hand inside his robe, ostensibly to scratch, really to tear a page corner from Grantorto's book. This also went into his mouth; saliva ought to be a fairish substitute for water. He mumbled the incantation. If it worked, Artegall and Belphebe ought to be weakened enough to let the prisoners escape.

Shea decided that he liked the little spray of freckles across Belphebe's nose, but that it was difficult to admire a girl who had a bead drawn on one's right kidney with a longbow. He would like to see more of Belphebe. She had about everything, including an adventurous spirit not unlike his own—

Why the devil was he so tired? He could barely drag one foot after the other. He should be hardened to strenuous living by now. Belphebe was drooping, too; the spring

had left her walk. Even the horse's head hung.

Artegall swayed in his saddle. He made one monstrous effort to balance himself, overcompensated, and slowly fell into the road with the dignity of a toppling factory chimney. The crash halted the procession. The horse sat down jerkily and sprawled beside its rider, its tongue lolling out. Chalmers and Grantorto followed suit, their chains jangling.

Artegall heaved himself up on one elbow. "Sorcery!" he drawled languidly. "The rascals have tricked us! Skewer them, Belphebe!"

The girl fumbled with her bow. Chalmers rolled over and reached hands and knees. "Come on, Harold! Rouse Grantorto!" he said. He smothered a yawn and started to crawl. "Dear me, I wish I could learn to keep these spells within bounds!"

Shea tried to leap over Grantorto; lost his balance and fell across the magician. Grantorto grunted as Shea's knees dug into him, but he, also, made his hands and knees. The three prisoners set off down the road in that fashion.

Shea looked back. Belphebe was still on her feet, trying to draw the bow, but lacking strength to pull it more than a few inches. She aimed up and let fly at random. The recoil knocked her over backward. The arrow soared in a whispering parabola and thwunked into the seat of Grantorto's pants with just enough force to stick. The magician yelped and increased his speed to almost a mile an hour.

"Hurry," said Shea. "They're coming after us." Belphebe was crawling along at a fair rate, regardless of the abrasion of her bare knees. Behind her, Artegall brought up the rear of the bizarre parade like some monstrous tailless lizard. In his armor he could barely move.

"Belphebe's gaining," remarked Shea, after a minute.

"That sorrows me not," said Grantorto, with a nasty expression. He fished a knife from his boot.

"Hey," said Shea, "not that!"

"And wherefore not?"

While Shea was trying to think of a reasonable answer, a man in a kilt appeared at the side of the road. For a moment he stared in astonishment at the singular procession, then put a willow whistle in his mouth and blew.

"The Da Derga!" gasped Grantorto. "Ah, who are we, to be caught thus!"

A swarm of the wild men came trotting through the trunks. All wore tartan kilts. With them were a number of lean, rough-coated dogs. The five crawlers were efficiently bowled over and frisked for weapons. Shea found himself looking into the ugly, bearded face of a gigantic redhead, who moved a rusty broadsword back and forth an inch from the prisoner's throat as though he were sawing. The redhead seemed to think it very funny.

"Sure an' is it not a strange thing to find them so?" remarked a benign-looking graybeard. "The folk would be taking poison to make them so weak."

"Do we be takin' them back entire," asked another, "or just their heads to put in the hall, now?"

"Shame on you, Shawn! 'Tis a month now since the gods have had a proper sacrifice. 'Tis a lack of proper reverence you show, I'm thinking."

SHEA COULD HAVE thought of one or two terms more appropriate than lack of reverence. But he was not consulted. He was tied up and suspended from a pole. For the next

hour or so, as the carriers of the pole jounced along, the pain in his wrists and ankles was too exquisite for him to think coherently.

They followed deer trails, ultimately emerging into a clearing with tents around it. The Da Derga were evidently on a raiding expedition; there were no women or children to be seen. The captives were dumped in a row near a rough-hewn wooden altar with ominously dark stains down its sides.

Shea whispered: "Can't you work a spell, Grantorto?"

"Aye, as soon as I recover from this curst weakness. Malediction on the bungling knave who clipped us in it!"

"I'm afraid I was . . . uh . . . responsible," said Chalmers humbly.

"May Beelzebub fly away with you then! After this, stick to your dragon-juggling tricks, and leave true magic to the great Grantorto. Was it not the grass-and-paper spell?"

"Yes."

"I trow I recognized the symptoms. Haro! 'Twill not wear off for hours, and by that time we shall be dead as Judas Iscariot. Ah, 'tis foul that the greatest master of magic the world has seen should come to an end thus, like a netted herring! The tragedy of it makes me weep."

He lapsed into gloomy silence. Shea thought desperately—what could they do? If neither the wily Grantorto nor the powerful Artegall could help, the case appeared hopeless. Another last-minute rescue from outside would be too much of a coincidence to hope for.

Three men in long white robes, absurdly garlanded with leaves, came out of a tent. One of them thoughtfully whetted a long knife. The sound it made on the stone was hard to bear.

The one with the knife came over and looked down at the captives. The amiable-looking chieftain remarked: "Sure, 'tis a likely lot they are, isn't it?"

"They'll do," replied the Druid. "For a chance-met lot, they'll do. The two younger are the handsomest. We'll take them first. But if it's so weak they are, how shall we ever get them to walk to the altar?"

"A couple of the lads will support them. Oh, Murrahu! Would you be getting your pipes?"

The Da Derga had formed a circle around the clearing. One of the Druids stood with his arms out and face to the sky, chanting, while another gestured symbolically over the altar. A third marched round the clearing, followed by the bagpiper. The piper cut loose with a sound like a thousand angry beehives. It seemed to Shea that a procession of ghostly figures was following the two marchers, floating in some medium of faint iridescence that made their forms and even their existence uncertain. The Da Derga bowed low as priest and piper passed, and stayed bent over till that trail of misty things had gone by.

It was extremely interesting. Shea wished he were in a position to appreciate it without being dominated by the thought that these were probably his last sense impressions. He wondered if the gods of the Da Derga had something in common with the ancient Celtic deities—By the great horn spoon, he had an idea!

A barbarian was cutting his bonds. Two others heaved him and Belphebe to their feet and supported them by the arms. Their expressions were of rapt ecstasy. Shea muttered out of the side of his mouth: "Hey, Belphebe, if I get you out of this,

Not quite a classical unicorn, Shea decided, but as a charger it left almost nothing to be desired save docility!

will you call a truce till we can explain?"

The girl nodded. The Druid with the knife took his place at the altar. Another came over to the captives, faced about, and started to lead them. Summoning all his strength, Shea barked: "Hey, Mr. Priest!"

The Druid turned. He had a kindly expression. "Now, laddie," he said, "it's no good shouting! Sure, 'tis an honor to be the first to go to the gods."

"I know it. But you don't think the gods will be satisfied with a bunch of weak fish like us, do you?"

"True enough for you. But the gods do be giving credit when a man offers the best he has, and faith, you are that."

"You could make us better, though. We're under a spell. You're a pretty good magician; why not take this weakness off us?"

The Druid's expression showed cunning. "I'm thinking you're saying that for your own benefit and not for ours, but 'tis rare good sense you speak, my boy." He looked at Shea, then at Belphebe and waved his hands toward them, mumbling. Shea felt the force flow back into his body. The old priest addressed the two with him: "Hold them tight, now, lads. It wouldn't do at all, at all, if they used their strength to get away."

THE ROUGH HANDS of the Da Derga clamped down on Shea's arms till he winced. He saw that Belphebe wasn't enjoying their grip either. He held himself relaxed, as though putty in their hands.

The procession approached the altar. The piper was red-faced, but seemed to be maintaining himself by that unique power all pipers have of keeping going long after ordinary people would collapse for lack of breath. Shea's feet dragged. The Druid with the knife awaited him with the supremely peaceful expression of a man who is rendering his own happiness sure by a great and noble act. The altar was only four paces away. He glanced toward Belphebe. Three. She was looking anxiously at him as though awaiting a signal. Two. He felt what he was waiting for—the relaxation of the tired, sweaty hands of the huskies. One. It was now or never.

Shea snapped his left heel up and back. It hit a hairy kneecap, and the barbarian went down with a yell of pain. He let go. Shea spun around on the other heel, driving his left knee into the other guard and at the same time punching him in the Adam's apple. The second guard, not expecting this demoniac burst of energy, let go and dropped, strangling in the agony of the throat punch.

What followed took seconds. The other two guards got their signals crossed, and instead of one of them holding Belphebe, both let her go to run at Shea. The woods girl pounced on the Druid with the knife and sank her teeth into his hand.

The guards were good rough-and-tumble fighters, but under the handicap of having to take their captives unharmed. Shea was under no such inhibition. He jabbed one in the eyes with his fingers and kicked the other in the belly. Somebody screeched. Belphebe ran past with a bloody knife in her hand, yanking Shea after her.

The other Da Derga were too dumfounded by the sacrilege to interfere. Shea and Belphebe raced through a hole in their circle just as the barbarians began reaching for their broadswords.

Then they were among trees, running madly. Belphebe glided ahead

of Shea without even breathing hard. He guessed she could leave him behind if she wished. She seemed to know the woods by instinct. She swerved right, squeezed between a pair of trunks, down to a brook, splashed along its bed for fifty yards, then was off into the woods again.

"Up!" cried Belphebe suddenly, and climbed a trunk with the agility of a small boy, lending a hand to help Shea. They crouched together in a crotch and listened.

Scattered sounds of pursuit came, now here, now there. The Da Derga had spread and were beating the woods. Shea and Belphebe held themselves still, almost breathless. There was a rustle of snapped twigs and a pair of the barbarians walked past a few yards from their tree, leading one of the huge dogs. "Sure, 'tis a terrible thing," said one of them. "Three men cut up, and one of them a holy man."

"A wicked, cruel thing. And poor Fion, with his lovely neck all broke in. It's inhuman monsters they are, those two."

The sounds died. They waited, and Shea explained his and Chalmers' plan to her in a whisper.

BELPHEBE gave Shea a level glance. Apparently satisfied with his sincerity, she asked: "Why said you not so sooner, good squire?"

"I couldn't in front of Grantorto without giving the whole show away. If you don't believe me, Britomart will give us good characters. Honest."

"You mean you plan still to go on with this witless scheme?"

"Of course, if we can rescue our people."

"You think Artegall would let Grantorto go?"

Shea hesitated. "I don't know Artegall. But you're right; he's the kind that, once he gets an idea, he won't change it for hell or high water."

Belphebe gave a gurgling little laugh. "You should be a court jester, Squire Harold. But your wit is well taken; that describes Artegall exactly."

"Well, we'll have to see to it that Artegall can't interfere till we've left."

"Nay. In honor I cannot take the side of that foul enchanter—"

"Look, Belphebe. Use your head. The nights of Faerie have been trying for years to catch up with these enchanters, haven't they?"

"That is good sooth."

"And they haven't made out very well, have they?"

"Gentle squire, you argue like a doctor. But I fear me you are right."

"All right. This riding around in an iron shirt and knocking off an occasional enchanter isn't going to get you anywhere, either. Now, my boss and I have a plan for getting into their organization and rounding up the whole batch at once. Why not let us try?"

"But how shall I—"

"Oh, tell Artegall we made a private truce to escape the Da Derga, and one of the conditions was that we get a head start before—" He stopped, listening.

Faintly, the drone of bagpipes wafted to them.

Belphebe cried: "The ceremony has begun again. Haste, or our friends are sped!" She began to climb down, but as they went Shea asked: "What can we do?"

"I'm not without some knowledge of things in the woods and their secret ways." She dropped to the ground and started to whistle a strange little tune. When the whistle reached an ear-piercing pitch, a

unicorn came trotting forward. It nuzzled up to her, pawing the ground, and she vaulted onto its back.

"How about me?" asked Shea.

Belphebe frowned. "Right glad would I be to have you ride with me, but I misdoubt this steed will bear the weight. And they are ever jealous beasts, not liking to go two and two. You could hold the tail."

That seemed unsatisfactory. But Shea thought, "After all, I know some magic and ought to be able to conjure one up, and a conjured unicorn probably won't object to this one. "If you'll show me that brook, I'll see what I can do," he said.

He composed his incantation on the way to the stream. At its bank he made a model, as well as he could, of the animal's head in wet sand, and stuck a stick in it for a horn. Then he recited:

"Oh, steed that feeds on the lightning
And drinks of the whirlwind's surge,
In the name of the horse of Heridall,
I conjure you, now, emerge!

"Strong and docile and valiant,
Decked with the single horn,
In the name of the horse of Mohammed,
I conjure you, be born!"

The brook exploded outward with a *whoosh* of spray. Shea jumped up and rubbed the water from his eyes —then rubbed them again to make sure. Once more, the travelers' magic had been almost successful.

Standing in the creek was a fine big bull Indian rhinoceros.

XI.

SHEA HAD a moment of panic. Then he remembered that the bad reputation of the rhinoceros tribe is based on the cantankerousness of the two-horned black rhino of Africa. Anyway, he couldn't fool around conjuring up more animals. As he had asked for a docile one, this was presumably it. He landed astride the rhino's back.

The rhinoceros might be docile, but it was unaccustomed to riders. When it recovered from the shock of its arrival in an unfamiliar section of spacetime, it scrambled out of the creek and galloped off through the trees in the wrong direction. Shea dug his fingers into the folds of its armor and hung on, yelling at Belphebe: "Hey! See if ugh . . . you can-. ugh herd this thing!"

The rhino, seeing the unicorn on its right, charged, snorting and baring its incisor tusks. The unicorn whirled aside and poked the rhinoceros in the ribs as it lumbered past. The rhinoceros, now thoroughly upset, tried to flee. Belphebe skillfully herded it toward the camp of the Da Derga.

The bagpipes were louder. The rhinoceros, now more afraid of the unicorn than of this noise, headed straight for the sound. Shea clung to its back, hoping it wouldn't ram a tree. The trees sprang apart in front, and there was the camp of the Da Derga. A couple of guards held Chalmers across the altar. The Druids had found another knife.

Shea yelled: *"Yeeeeeow!"*

Heads turned toward him. The upraised knife hung suspended. Shea had a blurred picture of the camp streaming past, and everywhere the backs of the Da Derga departing in a swirl of tartan. They screamed most gratifyingly.

Beyond the altar Shea tumbled off his mount and walked back. Belphebe had already cut the bonds from the others; but, stiff and weak as they were, they could not move.

"I trust," said Chalmers feebly, "that you are uh con-

vinced of the inadvisability of visiting ancient Ireland, Harold."

Shea grinned. "Well, yes, since you mention it." He turned to Grantorto. "I can take this weakness off you. But I'm sure a master like you would have a much better method than anything I could use. If you'll give the spell to me, I'll use it instead of my own."

"Marry, that will I. Few youngsters are so polite as to appreciate the powers of the masters these days. Bend down—"

Artegall raised a feeble hand to Belphebe. "What ails you, girl? Fall on these catiffs! Slay them!"

"The squire and I have a truce."

"A truce!" he growled. "Make a truce with the devil, or the Da Derga, but not with these enemies of humankind. The queen's majesty shall hear of this."

Shea was working the spell on Chalmers. As he got up he grunted: "Thank you, Harold. Really, do we have to go on—"

"Shut up, doc," snapped Shea. He didn't intend to have his delicate bit of finagling gummed up at this stage. Then he turned to Grantorto and worked the spell again.

The magician seemed annoyed that Chalmers should have preceded him, but it turned out to be a good idea. The moment Grantorto was on his feet, he snatched up one of the discarded sacrificial knives and flung himself toward the helpless Artegall. Belphebe tripped him as he tried to go past. Before he could get up, Shea was on his back with one hand on his neck and the other on his wrist. "Drop that!" he yelled.

THE MAGICIAN'S bulbous body heaved convulsively. Shea found himself gripping the neck of an enormous snake of the python type. With horror he felt the immense rubbery strength of the thing as it writhed a section from under him and tried to throw a coil around his body.

But, as snakes have no hands, Grantorto had perforce dropped the knife. Shea put the edge of it against the scaly throat. "Change back," he gritted, "or I'll saw yo r head right off!"

Grantorto changed back. "Are you clean daft?" he sputtered. "There's a stinking fool 'prentice for you—ruining our chance to get rid of our greatest enemy."

"Not at all, master," said Shea, relaxing his grip a trifle. "You forget there's a truce on. Belphebe and I agreed not to have any scrapping until we've separated."

"You mean to keep your word with *them?* 'Tis against nature and therefore void."

Shea clamped down his grip again and turned to Artegall: "If I release you from the weakness spell, will you give me your word of honor to let us have a two-hour start?"

"Fool! Doltard!" shouted Grantorto. But Artegall settled the question. "Covenant with an enchanter? Not I! Slay me if you will; you shall not rid yourselves of all Gloriana's knights so easily!"

Shea sighed at the unreasonableness of men. "Doc, watch Grantorto for a minute, will you?" He got up and said to Belphebe: "Take care of him after we go." Then, more softly: "Say, how can I get in touch with you again?"

She thought. "If you go not beyond the confines of this great wood, and know but how to call my unicorn of the forest—not that ungainly great beast of yours—"

"Can you whistle the tune for me—softly?" She did so, and he followed till he could do it. But she finished with a smile. "I misdoubt

you could entice her close enough. These unicorns fear not maidens, but men they are greatly wary of."

Shea pondered, then drew Chalmers aside, leaving Belphebe to guard Artegall against Grantorto. "Doc, can you conjure up sugar?"

"Harold, you are a continual source of astonishment to me. I really feel quite worn out, though. I'm incapable of coherent effort—"

Shea shook him by the shoulders. "Listen, doc!" he said fiercely. "I'm pretty close to the edge of collapse myself, but if you ever want to see Florimel again, you can't let me down! This is just a little applied psychology; to wit, setting up a homophiliac fixation in the libido of one female unicorn. Now, go to it!"

Water, charcoal from the remains of one of the Da Derga's cooking fires and a spell produced a double handful of neat patty-shaped molds of maple sugar, which Shea rather dubiously guessed would do. The unicorn sniffed suspiciously from a distance, then under Belphebe's coaxing teetered close enough to taste. It munched meditatively, wiggling its ears, then reached out its muzzle for more. Shea fed it another piece, then ostentatiously put the remainder in his pocket.

"All right," he said, "we're off. Say, Belphebe, maybe you better hitch J. Edgar Hoover's feet to the unicorn and haul him off before the Da Derga come back to see what happened." He glanced at the glowering Grantorto. "Two hours' truce, now, and you can thank Heaven they took her bow away."

XII.

THE DARK was beginning to close in. As they reached the road, Grantorto worked a spell and produced a horse. He mounted.

"Hey!" said Shea. "What about us?"

"I say a pox on you, 'prentice, for a rebellious rogue. Wend afoot and learn what it is to flout the great Grantorto."

Shea put on a sly grin. "You don't understand, master. Don't you think it pays for the Chapter to have someone that the opposition thinks is a real man of honor? I'm just building myself up for the job. When we get 'ready to put something really good over on that bunch and catch a lot of them at once, instead of just these two; I'll come in handy."

Grantorto considered a moment, then a smile ran round his red, full lips. "Oho! Sits the wind so? You want that red-polled baggage, eh? Well, when we capture her, you shall have her before she goes to the torture chamber—if the Chapter chooses to admit you. For I tell you fairly I doubt you are skilled enough in the more practical forms of magic."

Chalmers spoke up. "Ahem. You confessed, Grantorto, that you of the Chapter occasionally . uh work at cross-purposes."

"Aye. 'Tis in the nature of things. For look you, magic is an art disorderly."

"But it isn't! We can show you how to change all that."

"Here's strange doctrine! Do you jest?"

"Not at all. Didn't you notice the Druids' methods of doing magic?"

"Those priests of the Da Derga? Magic they have, aye, but so meager a sort any lout can outdo them."

"That's not the point. It's not what they do, but how they do it. One man invokes their gods; another changes the altar from wood to stone, and so on. One man per

function, and all timed to work together. That's real organization. Now, if . uh . . your Chapter were organized like that—"

Shea cut in: "You've been trying to break down Queen Gloriana's government and set up a council of magic to rule in its place, haven't you?" Nobody had told him that, but it seemed a reasonable guess.

"That we have; but the others worked singly, without any such leader as myself to guide them."

"But even you, master, you're only one, and can't be everywhere at once. As it stands, your Chapter is a professional guild. It keeps you from cutting each other's throats by competition, but that's all. You won't get anywhere just bopping off an occasional knight. We can show you how to make a real organization out of it, with all the parts working together as smoothly as the Faerie knights work together. The beauty of such an organization is that when it gets such a man of genius as yourself to guide it, everyone in the organization becomes a kind of extension of the leader's personality. It's just as though your Chapter were made into twenty-one Grantortos. Gloriana's government could never stand against that."

"Ho-ho!" cried Grantorto. "Now this proves once more that I am, as some are good enough to say, the great Grantorto, and practically infallible in my judgment of men. I knew from the beginning that your minds held some noble and worthy plan for the advancement of the Chapter and the cause of magic. But I was forced to test you to bring it out. So—we are friends again, and I'll seal the bond by bringing forth your beasts and belongings."

He wheeled his own horse behind a tree. He worked a spell that sent a pillar of smoke towering through the branches to catch the last rays of the sun. From beneath it Adolphus and Gustavus trotted out to stand in the twilight beside their masters, the former with Shea's épée at the saddle. Grantorto came back, grinning as though at some private joke.

"I shall present you to the Chapter as specialists in strange beasts," he remarked amiably. "That monster you rode to our rescue was as fearsome a hobgoblin as ever I saw, friend Harold. You see, I have the custom, not common among great men, of being affable to my juniors."

It was growing very dark under the trees, and the horses began to stumble on the ruinous road. Another hour of riding brought them to an opening. Midway along it and fairly close to the road, a thatched hut stood in the inadequate moonlight. One window was lighted.

"The castle of Busyrane," remarked Grantorto.

"It seems somewhat . . uh . . . exiguous," offered Chalmers timidly.

"Ho-ho! You know not our Archimage, who is a master of show and illusion, and sets such gulls to catch the unwary. Do but watch."

As Grantorto spoke the moon was blotted out. Shea heard a flutter of wings. Something brushed past his face. There was a sensation of insectlike crawling on his left hand that made him snatch it from the bridle. A long, low ululating shriek rose out of the dark. The horse quivered uncertainly beneath him. Its hoofs clacked on stone in the velvet black. Down at stirrup level a face appeared. It had huge, drooping ears and ragged teeth fixed in a permanent grin above the pendulous lower lip. There was no source of light for it to be seen by,

nothing but that face floating by itself.

"The master makes you welcome and bids you dismount," mouthed the face indistinctly.

A clawlike hand reached up to help Shea from his mount. Though by now well inured to shocks, he could not help a shiver at the clammy cold touch. Grantorto chuckled behind him. He shook off the horrors and followed the guidance of the corpselike fingers down a corridor of utter dark. Something rustled, and he caught the sickening odor of cockatrice. A door closed. He was standing in a big room, blinking in a flood of light, with the other two beside him.

An elderly man, wearing a palmer's robe like Chalmers', came forward to meet them. He smiled graciously. "Welcome, good Grantorto! To what fortunate chance owe we your presence here before the meeting?"

"To the same chance that brings me here with these two stout fellows, whom I rescued but today from Artegall's curst clutches." This version was a trifle startling, but Shea had the sense to lay low as Grantorto described his thrilling rescue of Shea and Chalmers. He went on: "Most noble Archimage, a plan has occurred to me. As you know, people are good enough to say that I have a talent for plans amounting almost to genius.

"Surely, noble Archimage, you are sib to the fact that you are but one and cannot be all places at once. As it stands, you head the Chapter well; but it is a professional guild. It prevents our cutting each other's throats by competition, but no more. What we need is an organization that will work all together as the Faerie knights work together. It would be as though our mastership were composed of twenty-one Busyranes. Gloriana's government would have ill hap against it, eh?

"By the favor of fortune, I fell in with these two, desirous of admission to the Chapter. With that skill at judging character for which I am well known, I saw at once that they were experts in exactly the form of organization we need. I present you, therefore, Reed de Chalmers, magician, and Harold de Shea, apprentice, as worthy members of our society. In magic, their art is the conjuration of singular and unheard-of beasts."

"Enchanted, magical sirs," said Busyrane, with a polite bow. "Your application shall receive the most earnest attention. We presume, good Grantorto, you have heard the sad news?"

"That have I not."

"Poor Malvigen is slain—spitted through with an arrow by that shedevil Belphebe."

"The curst vile tripping wench!" Grantorto turned to Shea and Chalmers. "Magical sirs, I ask you, is this not a hard thing? Here's a man who spent a lifetime in the study and practice of magic; Malvigen. Made himself a great specialist in erotic dreams, excelling even the great Grantorto in that one art. Now he's snuffed out in a second, like a wild boar, and for why? Because his attainments violate what those at the court choose to call morality."

SHEA WOKE from a dream of being shrunk to a stature of one inch and swallowed by a snake. His clothes lay over a chair. They had evidently been given a magical laundering and mending, since they looked as good as new, in contrast to their worn and dirty state of the previous evening.

Chalmers came in. His clothes also were clean, and he looked younger than Shea remembered having seen him. He burst out: "I've found Florimel!"

"*Shhh!* For Pete's sake not so loud. Tell me about it."

"She was walking on the battlements. Really, this place is quite large when seen by daylight. Busyrane was most affable. It appears he intends to use her for the object —perfectly legitimate from his point of view—of causing dissension—"

"O. K., doc. O. K.! I get it. You're all excited. What did you really find out? Who is this Florimel, anyhow?"

"She was . uh . manufactured out of snow by a person called the Witch of Riphoea, as a duplicate or double of the genuine Florimel, who seems to have disappeared. Busyrane tells me it is at least theoretically possible to find a magical spell that will endow her with a genuine human body. He was most kind, most kind. I am afraid we may have misjudged—"

"Yeah, he promised he'd help you fix her up, I suppose."

Chalmers was suddenly dignified. "As a matter of fact, he did. But I cannot see how this affects—"

Shea jumped up. "Oh, my God! Next thing you'll be selling out to the magicians and letting Gloriana's crowd go chase themselves—as long as you can make this snow girl."

"That's not fair, Harold! After all, you were the one who insisted that we go ahead with our campaign, when I was willing to—"

"Yeah? Who had the bright idea of getting pally with the magicians in the first place? Who got up this marvelous plan—"

"Young man, let me tell you that you're grossly unreasonable as well as grossly reckless. You've placed us in one predicament after another by getting into fights for no good reason. You force my hand by making me use spells before I've tried them out. Now, when I wish to embark on a really important scientific experiment—"

"I suppose it never occurred to you that Busyrane might be trying to suck you in to work for him by means of this girl. He controls her, and—"

"*Shh!* You needn't shout!"

"I'm not shouting!" roared Shea.

A knock on the door made them both go silent. "Uh . ahem . . come in!" said Chalmers.

Busyrane stood on the threshold, rubbing his hands. "Good morrow, magical sirs. We heard your conversation and bethought us there might be something our humble household might supply or our feeble powers obtain for your use."

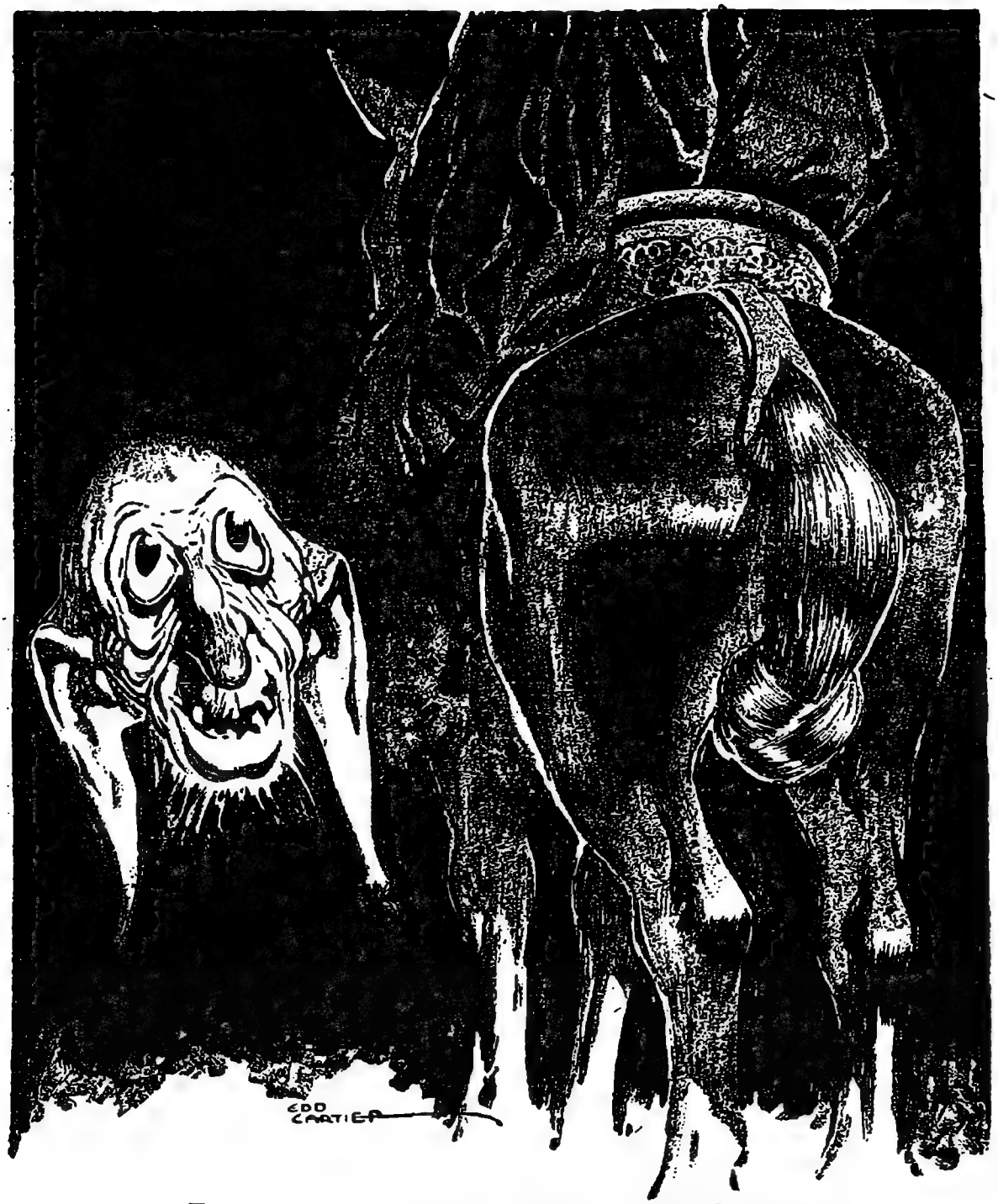
Chalmers made a good recovery. "We were wondering— You know, the job of providing organization requires a special . uh . methodology. The science of combinational magic uh . . uh—"

Shea took over. "What we mean is, could we have the loan of some laboratory facilities?"

"Oh, certes, that lies within our gift. We have a disused chamber that would admirably serve. A few prisoners, even, on which you may experiment. We shall be happy, also, to furnish you with a cockatrice. If your honors will have the goodness to follow our poor person—"

When the head enchanter had left them, Shea and Chalmers drew deep breaths. They had watched him for the least sign of suspicion, but he had displayed none—so far.

Chalmers said: "Let me offer my



Down at stirrup level a face appeared, quite unsupported, and looking mournfully upward—

apologies for uh my hastiness."

"That's O. K., doc. I shouldn't have flown off the handle And I'm sorry for running you ragged by being reckless."

They shook hands, like a pair of shamefaced small boys. "What's the program now?" asked Shea.

"Well . . ahem . . I'd like to restore Florimel—that is, to give her a human body. Also, she might not find a person of my years peculiarly congenial. I observe Busyrane is able to assume almost any age he wishes."

"Ha—" Shea had started to laugh, but stopped as Chalmers gave him a hurt look. "After all, Harold, what's so heinous about wishing to be young?"

"It isn't that, doc. I just remembered something you said—about amorous adventure having few attractions for a person of your age."

Chalmers smiled in mild triumph. "You forget that if I succeed in the rejuvenating process, I shall no longer be a person of my age!"

XIII.

"Good gracious," said Chalmers. "That's the second time you've wandered off the incantation! Whatever is on your mind, Harold?"

Shea stared absently at the big steel cage filling half the laboratory. Into it, with the aid of a pot containing a small fire, they were trying to conjure a dragon—one dragon. "Nothing much," he replied, "except I'm wondering about this flock of bogymen that's due to show up for the meeting tomorrow."

It was only half the truth. Shea had not given up his idea of a grand assault on the place and the capture of all the enchanters at once. The previous evening, without telling Chalmers, he had been out to look over the ground.

At the precise point where the gate began to fade from view, with rocks and trees on the other side of the building showing through it, he stopped and took careful bearings on the nearby landmarks. He chuckled internally over the thought that these invisible castles wouldn't be practical if the people of Faerie knew a little elementary surveying. Then he wedged the gate open with a small stone and slipped off among the trees.

There he cautiously whistled the tune Belphebe had taught him. No result. He went through it a second time and a third, wondering how long it would be before his absence were noticed. He was just about to give up when he saw a unicorn, apparently the same one Belphebe had ridden, peering from behind a tree. It sniffed suspiciously before coming forward to mouth one of the maple-sugar lumps.

Shea wrote:

Dearest Belphebe: We are at Busyrane's castle. It lies about two hours' ride along the road from the place where we got away from the Da Derga. Looks like a hut till you turn off the road east and follow a track till you get to a big oak tree, the biggest in the neighborhood, in line with a hill that has a round top. Then you can see the castle. Could you arrange to be in the neighborhood in about forty-eight hours? I'll call the unicorn at that time and if you're riding it, will see you. Be careful about the magicians, will you?

H. S.

He impaled the note on the unicorn's horn and shooed the animal away. "Now," he thought, "if I make a break from the castle, I'll have a guide. If I don't, at least I'll see her again—"

That was last night. During the morning, he was more and more nervous and preoccupied, and now for the second time he had wandered from the incantation he and Chalmers were trying to work. "Nothing much," he had answered Chalmers' inquiry. Chalmers

glanced at him shrewdly and hummed:

"Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me, lackadaydee!
He sipped no sup, and he craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a layde!"

SHEA LOOKED at his partner sharply, but Chalmers' expression was bland. How much did he suspect?

But Chalmers was wrapped up in the task. "Now," he said, "let's try again. 'By Fafnir and Python, Midgardsormr and Yang—'" The incantation rolled out. The smoke from the fire in the cage thickened, and the amateur enchanters went on, ready to yell the counterspell Chalmers had worked out if the thing got out of hand.

It was a variant on the original dragon spell, with wording and preparations slightly changed. There was a shrill metallic hiss and a minor convulsion in the smoke. The incantation stopped. The incantators stood gauping.

They had produced a dragon, all right. One dragon, not a hundred. But this dragon was ten inches long, with batwings and a prominent sting on the end of its tail. It breathed fire.

The bars of the cage had been made strong enough to hold a dragon of conventional size. But this little horror fluttered up to them, squeezed through, and flew straight at the experimenters.

"Yeow!" yelled Shea, as a blast of flame from its jaws singed the hair off the back of his hand. *"Awk!"* shrieked Chalmers as the sting got him in the ankle. They tumbled over each other and dashed around the laboratory, Shea brandishing his épée and Chalmers swinging a pestle. The dragonlet dodged past them and flew through the door into the corridor. There was a rustle and a heavy clank.

Shea went down the corridor. He came back with his face a trifle white.

"The cockatrice looked at it," he said, and held out a perfect stone dragon, ten inches long.

"Put it down," said Chalmers gloomily. He hobbled around, looking for something to put on his stung ankle. "Damnation, Harold, if there were only some way to control these things quantitatively—"

"I thought that was it," replied Shea. "What went wrong to give us that animated blowtorch?"

"I don't know. The only . . uh . . certitude is that we got our decimal point off again. We got point oh oh oh one dragon instead of a hundred dragons. I confess, the solution eludes me. The calculus of classes contains no aspect of quantitative accuracy—"

THE REST of the day gave them a sea horse three feet long and, after some effort, a cask to put it in; six stuffed owls with blue glass eyes; and finally a large and amiable tomcat with nine tails. The last experiment found a moon looking in the castle window, so they gave up and went to bed. Chalmers murmured sadly that if he tried to give Florimel a human body in the present state of his knowledge, he'd probably make her into a set of lovely but embarrassing Siamese triplets.

There were noises during the night. Neither slept well till toward morning. When they rose, someone was tapping at their door.

It proved to be a long-eared, potbellied imp, who handed them a sheet of parchment, grinned, and sped off down the corridor. Shea and Chalmers read:

YE ENCHAUNTERS' CHAPTER

will meete in COUNCIL this daye
in ye greate Hall of Castle Busyrane

Archimage	Maistre Magitian Busyrane
Viceregente	M. M. Grantorto
Archiviste -	M. M. Courromont
Keeper of ye Moneys	M. M. Voulandoure

Ye FYRSTE Daye

Addresse of ye Archimage -	M. M. Busyrane
Reading of ye minutes -	M. M. Courromont
Report on ye treasurie -	M. M. Voulandoure

Here will neue members be THOUGHT on

Now cometh ye professional meeting

1. M. M. Grantorto - "Ye POWERES magickal of six selected Water Fay-Human HYBRIDS."

2. M. M. Sournoy - "A neue use for ye BLOUD of unbaptized infants."

3. M. M. Nuisane - "Of ye COMPARATIVE efficacie of ye Essence of ye Spotted Frogge & ye Common GREEN Frogge in sleeping Enchauntments."

These all with Diverse experiments and shews by ye MAISTRES aforesaid.

Daye ye 2nd

Ye Maistres will meete in Executive Council in ye P. M.

Banquet	at Vespers
Maistre of ye TOASTS	M. M. Nuisane

Ye BLACK MASSE will be Celebrated after, followed by a Graund Ball, with various Comely Witches, Sprites, and Succubi.

"Sounds like a big occasion," observed Shea. "Let's go down to the great hall, and see who can we find."

They found their way to a huge room whose stained-glass windows bore pictures of mystical signs grouped round centerpieces of knights in magical torment. Already five people were gathered at one end, talking earnestly. Shea recognized Busyrane, Grantorto, and Duessa. He caught a fragment of a story Grantorto was telling: —"and I say he was no more than a bungling poursuivant, journeyman though he ranked. Imagine summoning up a devil, but leaving one corner of the pentagon open! He deserved no better than he got—ho-ho!—which was to have his head torn off by the demon's red-hot pincers! Ha, here come my pair! Busyrane, do 'em the honors!"

The Archimage bowed, first to Duessa and then to the new arrivals. "We are highly favored," he said, "to present Master Reed de Chalmers, who has applied for elevation to the honorable state of mastership in our Chapter. He is most expert, most expert, in the production of singular monsters, also a man full of ideas for the benefit of our order. Also his apprentice, Harold de Shea."

WAS THERE a slight change in the voice on that last sentence? Shea could not be sure, and Duessa was curtsying, pronouncing in a fine contralto: "Enchanted, good magical sirs." With that red hair she was certainly a beauty when she wanted to be gracious. If only—

Plop! A bare-necked vulture flopped through the window and lit beside them, then changed into a hook-nosed man in a long monk's outfit. "The good Fripon!" exclaimed Grantorto. "How wags the world with you?"

"By your leave, not well," croaked the good Fripon, sadly. "I had all but trapped that wretch Belphebe when what does she do but get a counterspell from Cambina, then shoot an arrow through one of the best sprites I ever had. Curse her! She's killing off the Losels, too."

"I live for the day when I can tear her toenails out," said Duessa venomously. Shea's scalp tingled. A dust whirlwind that puffed in the window set everyone coughing, and dissolved into a short, fat man, who mopped his brow.

"*Whew!*" he said. "Fatiguing! Still it's better than walking for a man of my figure. Hope you have an ample lunch, Busyrane. Always thinking of my belly, that's me, Voulandoure, at your service. Ah, fair Duessa! And the good Fripon! Still cheating the gravedigger, my gloomy friend?" He poked Fripon's ribs.

Now magicians began to pour into the hall, by window and door, so many of them Shea could not keep up with their names. The trumpet for the midday meal found him vainly trying to catch up—and also separated him from Chalmers, who was taken in tow to sit at the masters' table.

Shea found himself next to a fuzzy-haired youth who said shyly: "Pray, generous sir, may I see your enchanted blade?"

"Huh?" said Shea. "But it—" before it occurred to him that no useful purpose would be served by disillusioning these people about the épée. He produced it and handed it over. The fuzzy young man waved it over the table, making noises of approval.

"I feel no sudden access of strength," he remarked. "The spell must be very subtle. Or perhaps it is one you use on yourself—no, that

could not be, for Cambina's magic prevented the use of such spells at the tournament. Hey, Grimbald!" He reached across and touched the blue-jowled man on Shea's other side. "He beat two of the most renowned knights of Faerie with this toothpick!"

"Aye," replied the other, looking up from his plate, "including one of ours." He addressed Shea directly. "Knew you not that Blandamour and Paridell, though they wear the Faerie livery, are in the service of this Chapter? Nay, you're not a member—how could you? But 'ware both in the future."

That explained a lot, thought Shea: the actions of the two knights, for one thing; and for another, why the magicians were so polite to him, though his rating was no more than that of an apprentice. There would be something practically supernatural about modern fencing technique to these people.

XIV.

Busyrane had arranged his hair so that the light falling through the stained-glass window touched it to a halo. He might have been some kindly saint as he began:

"Magical sirs and ladies: Many are the pleasures that have fallen to our lot, but none equal to that of beholding you here assembled beneath our humble roof to carry on the good name and high purpose of magic. Ah, how much better and brighter a world it were if all in it could but know you all—could but see you all. My friends—"

The afternoon was warm, the lunch had been ample, and Shea had a feeling of having heard something like this before. His eyelids began to weigh on him. The smooth voice rolled on:

"—in the days of King Huon of glorious and blessed memory, my friends, when we lived a more abundant life—"

Shea felt himself itching, now here, now there, now all over. He made one more effort to keep awake, then lapsed into an unashamed doze.

He was aroused by a mild patter of applause. Busyrane's place was taken by the keeper of ye archives, Courromont, a thin-lipped, bloodless-looking man, who hardly moved his mouth as he read:

"At the council of the Enchanters' Chapter on August 1st, following the address of our beloved Archimage, six members were advanced in grade from apprentice to journeyman and one journeyman member to wit the esteemed Sournoy was advanced to the full rank of master magician it was furthermore decided to raise the annual dues from seven and a half to ten elfars papers were read at the professional session by Master Magicians Malvigen and Denfero with various works of magical prowess in illustration it was furthermore resolved in the executive session to empower a special committee for drastic action against certain individuals of the Faerie court whose activities have become threatening to wit the knight Sir Cambell and Belphebe of the woods and the Princess Britomart the knights of the Chapter Blandamour and Paridell were accordingly—"

Shea came wide awake, but there were no details. Busyrane merely asked if it were moved and seconded that the minutes be accepted. They were.

Voulandoure's fat face shone greasily in the heat as he droned off figures and urged members to pay their dues on time. What could those plans for drastic action have been? Presumably the late Malvi-

gen had tried one of them when he got Belphebe's arrow through him, but what else?

His attenti was snapped back by Busyrane's use of his name: "—proposed that the magicians Reed de Chalmers and Harold de Shea be admitted with the ranks of master magician and apprentice. If these gentlemen will kindly leave the room—"

Outside, Shea said softly: "Did you hear what they said about Belphebe?"

"Dear me, yes. Duessa seems quite determined on that point. She used a most vulgar term in speaking of her—one normally employed in the . . uh . propagation of dogs. When—"

"What are they going to *do*? Specifically?" Shea's voice was urgent.

"I—" The door opened and a voice called: "Master Reed de Chalmers."

Shea was left to fidget for five minutes before being summoned. Busyrane grasped him by the hand at the door and led him to the front of the hall. "We present to you the apprentice Harold de Shea as a member of this Chapter," he said. "A very worthy magical person, adept in the production of strange monsters, adroit in enchantments connected with the profession of arms. Apprentice Harold de Shea"—he turned toward the new member—"as members of a high intellectual calling we despise the silly ceremonies of admission such as the court uses for its orders of knighthood. Therefore, we will merely bid you welcome; but doubtless the other apprentices will have something to say to you tomorrow night after the Black Mass."

Voulandoure came over and squeezed Shea's hand in his own thick, moist ones. "My 'gratulations, also, magical sirs!" He lowered his voice. "May I point out the initiation fee—"

"Ahem," said Chalmers, who had joined the group. "How much?"

"Fifty elfars for yourself, Master Magician Reed, and twenty-five for 'Prentice Harold."

Chalmers looked slightly stricken. He fished out the money bag. His face showed some relief, but not much, when its contents proved adequate. "I should think," he remarked, "that with so many fine magicians about, you'd have no difficulty in conjuring up uh all necessary funds."

A shadow crossed the face of ye keeper of yè moneys. "Alas, magical sir, our great problem! 'Tis a department involving the use of the philosophers' stone and the blood of infants, this much we know. But our research in the question has been interrupted by the activities of that curst court and the companions, and I fear me we shall never succeed till we rid ourselves of them."

"Aye," said Grantorto. "The one who came nearest the solution was the enchantress Acrasia. She did make a conjured gold that was all but permanent; met every test, and would only turn to ashes when one pronounced a Pater Noster. But where's Acrasia now? Eh? Dead, down and drownded by one of Gloriana's companions, a murrain on them all."

"Good Master Grantorto!" It was Busyrane. "The professional meeting is called, and I doubt not the other masters are as eager as we ourselves to hear your paper."

Shea found the fuzzy-haired youth at his elbow. "D'you play at checks? We 'prentices are left much to our own devisings when the masters gabble."

"Checks?"

"Aye, you know, king, queen, knight, fool, pawn, check and you're mate. I'm hand in glove with one of Busyrane's imps, who'll furnish us a mug or two of musty ale to pass the time while we play."

It sounded an attractive program. But Shea remembered that chess game afterward. The fuzzy-haired apprentice was not naturally a good player. Shea beat him in the first two games easily, winning the small bets the youth insisted on "to make the sport more interesting." Then the musty ale or the youth's magic —too late Shea remembered what profession he was an apprentice in —rose up and bit him. The fuzzy one's pieces turned up in the most unexpected places, executing the most astonishing gambits and combinations. With every new defeat Shea grew more annoyed. Whether through annoyance or the musty ale, he began offering to double the bets for the next one.

When the doors at the end of the hall were flung open and the master magicians emerged, the fuzzy youth was remarking gaily: "That makes eighty-six elfars, sixteen you stand in my debt. Ha-ha, that reminds me. Did I ever tell you about the journeyman Sligon, who owed my master, Voulandoure, sixty elfars over a box of dice? He refused to pay—said he couldn't—even when Voulandoure sent him a plague of boils. Well, wasn't it funny, when Sligon was playing with his own cat one day, that he should turn into a fish? I say a good magician should never lack for money, when there are people who can be kidnaped and ransomed. Don't you agree?"

"That's right," said Shea with a heartiness which he hoped didn't sound too hollow. He got up to join Chalmers.

THE ELDER psychologist was looking pleased with himself. "A trifle harrowing that session, but gratifyingly informative," he said as they went toward their rooms. "I really feel I've learned something about quantitative control. In fact, I'm confident that in a few months' research I can learn enough not only to transform Florimel and to rejuvenate myself, but also to . uh . revolutionize the entire practice of magic in Faerie, to make its benefits available to all."

"Yes, but"—Shea looked worried —"did you find out what they intend to do about Belphebe?"

"I gather that that is a matter for the uh . . executive session of tomorrow. But as I understand the outlines of the plan, it is not to direct the enchantments against her in person. She's protected against them. They intend rather to place spells on the two or three places where she sleeps, with the design of causing her to fall into so deep a slumber that she can be captured."

They paused on Chalmers' threshold. He added: "However, I wouldn't worry about the young woman's . . uh . . safety, Harold. As I understand it she is to be brought here, and I am sure that as a member of the Chapter I can persuade them not to harm her. In fact—"

"For the love of Mike, doc, are you throwing in with these guys, or just plain daffy? Didn't you hear Duessa talking about pulling Belphebe's toenails out, and Grantorto mentioning the torture chamber? Wake up! You're being an old fool!"

"Harold, I must request you not to use such intemperate language. After all, I'm somewhat your senior, and I require the uninterrupted use of all facilities as well as your own cordial co-operation to put this mat-

ter on a scientific basis. In a few months I shall be in a position to effect an industrial revolution in magic—"

"Theory! Months! I might have known that's what you'd be after! Can't you realize somebody's in danger?"

"I shall certainly give my most earnest attention to persuading the other members of the Chapter that this young woman to whom you are so attached is innocuous, and—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Forget it! Good night." Shea stalked out, more angry with Chalmers than he had ever been before. He did not hear the velvety click of the Judas window in Chalmers' room. Nor could he overhear the two men in the secret passage that led to that window.

Busyrane's voice was bland. "We were good enough to warn you that the young man was a suspicious character and mingled somehow in the affairs of the court."

"Can it be that my judgment, usually so keen, was altogether thrown off?" asked Grantorto.

"Oh, you were right about the older. He's a proper magician and devoted to the Chapter. But the younger—he'll bear more than watching. A friend of Belphebe, forsooth!"

XV.

SHEA LAY in bed, staring at the black ceiling. No use trying to get the doc to do anything. His heart was in the right place. But between his devotion to Florimel and his devotion to theory he could not be convinced that these enchanters, who talked so glibly of intellectual achievements, were bloody-minded racketeers who intended to put Belphebe, Britomart, and a lot of others to a slow and intricate death.

Shea shuddered as he thought of it. Whatever was done to save them, he would have to do, quickly. Yes, and to keep Chalmers from turning the products of his really fine scientific mind over to these rascals.

The castle was silent. He slipped out of bed, dressed, and buckled the faithful épée over his shoulder. It would not be much use against enchantments. But as long as the enchanters themselves believed it had magic power, it would help.

The door swung open noiselessly. There was no light in the corridor. The stone floor was cold under Shea's feet. His soft leather boots made soundless progress. If he kept one hand along the wall, he thought he could find the way to the great hall, and so out. Step—step—the hand that had been following the wall touched nothingness. An appalling odor of cockatrice assailed his nostrils. Evidently the door of somebody's laboratory. He went down to hands and knees and slithered past an inch at a time, hoping the creature would not wake up.

So. Here was the head of the stair. He took one step down, two—and felt something soft touch his ankles. Another step—and the something soft was clear to his waist, catching at him. It felt ropy and vaguely slimy, a whole tangle of slime—cobwebs! For a moment Harold Shea felt unreasoning panic, as it seemed that going ahead and turning back would be equally fatal. Then he realized that this would be some of Busyrane's magic, part of the ordinary castle safeguards, and of no special significance.

Yet what would cut through or destroy cobwebs? Fire. He had no

fire. But in his previous adventure in Scandinavian myth, Surt's giants had made use of flaming swords, and he had the épée. With an incantation to make use of the law of similarity it might become a flaming sword. On that narrow, stone-walled spiral staircase it was altogether unlikely that anyone would be able to see the light.

With the ghostly fingers of the cobwebs clutching at his legs, Shea stood on the stair and thought as he never had before of a spell:

"Sword, sword, sword that is now my salvation.
Make me a light to cut through thes cobwebs:
Be like Surt's sword to cut through this maze."

He could feel the hilt growing warm.

"Help my escape to reach consummation;
In the name of Durandal, help me to be free."

It was not outrageously good poetry, but the hilt was so hot that he snatched it out. A smoky red flame ran down the blade and dropped from the point, revealing the whole stairwell from wall to wall and as high as Shea stood, filled with a solid mass of the hideous gray material. A man could smother in it easier than not. Busyrane left nothing to chance.

Shea slashed at the stuff with the flaming épée. It shriveled left and right before him, back against the wall with hissing, foul-smelling flames running along the strands. He advanced slowly, cutting one step at a time. As he reached the bottom and the last cobwebs, the fire in the blade went out. He was in the great hall; but a few steps carried him through it, across the forecourt and to the gate.

A moon looked down out of a cloudless sky. Shea cursed it softly to himself, wondering whether he ought to take a chance on crossing the open stretch between gate and the shelter of the trees before it set. He decided to try it.

Bending low, he scuttled rapidly across the space, his cloak flapping like a vampire's wings. He made it without stumbling and looked back. The castle had disappeared. There was nothing visible but stony ground with the hut in the middle.

Once among the trees, he began pacing the circuit of the clearing, whistling very softly to himself the unicorn tune and pausing to listen. A quarter of the way round he was halted by a tense whisper, "Stand, sir!"

"Belphebe!"

"Aye." She stepped from her place of concealment, arrow drawn to the head. "In good sooth you look like Harold de Shea. But show me how you hold that narrow sword."

Shea drew the still-warm épée and demonstrated.

"Certes, then you are indeed he. I feared lest the enchanters had sent a phantom forth to beguile me. Right glad I am to see you, Squire Harold."

Shea said: "Say, I'm glad to see you, too. I knew I could depend—"

"Save your fair speeches for another hour. Here is danger. What is toward?"

Shea explained. Belphebe said: "For myself I fear not, though I thank you for the warning. Yet it's somewhat otherwise with Britomart, who has not the protection of the woods so close as I. And sure it were shame to miss the chance of catching the entire Chapter at once. Let me think. I left Artegall at a woodcutter's cot on the far flank of

Loselwood. His man Talus had gone to fetch Cambina, that she might heal his bruises and calm his mind."

"So Cambina's a psychologist, too. Why does he need his mind calmed?"

"Why, sir, he's the chief justiciar of all Faerie. Without a calm mind, how shall he hold the balance even? Let us go thither and lay this matter before him. Certes, we two cannot lay so many rogues by the heels alone."

Two hours of walking brought Shea to the yawning stage. The moon had sat. Under the black trees, even the sure-footed Belphebe found the going hard. She was ready to listen to suggestions for a nap.

"Sleep is still far from me now," she said. "If you wish, I will keep watch for the first hour—which should be till the stars of the bear sink to the top of that tree." She pointed. Shea, too drowsy to notice, composed himself to rest.

The next thing he knew, he was being shaken awake in a brightening world.

"Hey, young lady," he said through his first yawn, "I thought you were going to wake me up after the first hour."

"And so thought I. But you were so in comfort that I wanted the heart to rouse you. I need but little sleep."

"Naughty. What about my masculine pride?"

She made a face at him. "I forgot that. Men are such foolish carls about it. But, come." She danced a step or two. "Tirra-lirra, a brave day. Let's forth and seek our breakfast."

As they walked along, Belphebe peering toward thickets for an edible target, and Shea a bit woozy from lack of sleep, he asked: "D'you suppose Cambina will have calmed Artegall down enough so he'll listen to my explanations before he starts carving?"

"A thing to think on! Will you hide while I speak him fair?"

"Guess I'll take a chance on his temper." Shea wasn't going to have Belphebe suspect him of timidity at this stage.

"Now, that's the kind of answer I like." She smiled at him, and he felt rewarded.

They had reached a stretch of drier ground where the glades expanded to continuous meadow and the forest shrank to clumps of trees. A leathery rustle made them look up.

OVERHEAD swooped a nightmarish reptile the size of an observation plane. It had two legs and a pair of huge batwings. On its back rode Busyrane, all clad in armor but his face, which was smiling benignly. "Well met, dear friends!" he called down. "What a pleasing thought! Both at once."

Twunk! went Belphebe's bow. The arrow soared through one wing membrane. The beast hissed a little and banked for a turn.

"Into the woods," cried Belphebe, and set the example. "The wivern cannot fly among the trees."

"What did you call it? Looks like some kind of a long-tailed pterodactyl to me." Shea craned his neck as the sinister shadow wove to-and-fro above the leaves.

Belphebe led the way to the opposite side of the grove. When Busyrane circled above the segment away from them, they dashed across the open space and into the next clump. A shrill hiss behind and above warned them that they had been spotted.

They worked their way through

this grove. From under the trees they could see Busyrane silhouetted against the sky, while he couldn't see them.

"Now!" said Belphebe and ran like an antelope through the long grass. Shea pounded after. This was a longer run than the first, a hundred yards or more. Halfway across he heard the hiss of cloven air behind and drove himself for all his strained lungs were worth. The shadow of the monster unblurred in front of him. It was too far, too far—and then he was under the friendly trees. He caught a glimpse of the reptile, horribly close, pulling up in a stall to avoid the branches.

Shea leaned against a trunk, puffing. "How much more of this is there?"

Belphebe's face had a frown. "Woe's me; I fear this forest thins ere it thickens. But let's see."

They worked round the edges of the grove, but it was small and the distance to all others, but the one they had come from, prohibitively great.

"Looks like we have to go back," said Shea.

"Aye. I like not that. Assuredly he will not have pursued us alone."

"True for you. I think I see something there." He pointed to a group of distant figures, pink in the rising sun.

Belphebe gave a little squeak of dismay. "Alack, now we are undone, for they are a numerous company. If we stay, they surround us. If we flee, Busyrane follows on that grim mount— What are you doing?"

Shea had gotten out his knife and was whittling the base of a tall sapling. He replied: "You'll see. This worked once and ought to again. You're good at tree climbing; see if you can find a bird's nest. I need a fistful of feathers."

She went, puzzled but obedient. When she returned with the feathers, Shea was rigging up a contraption of sapling trunk and twigs, tied together with ivy vine. He hoped it wasn't poison ivy. It bore some resemblance to an enormous broom. As Shea lashed a couple of crosspieces to the stick he explained: "The other one I made a single-seater. This'll have to carry tandem. Let's see the feathers, kid."

He tossed one aloft, repeating the dimly remembered spell he had used once before, and then shoved it in among the twigs.

"Now," he said, "I'm the pilot and you're the gunner. Get astride here. Think you can handle your bow while riding this thing?"

"What will it do?" she asked, looking at Shea with new respect.

"We're going up to tackle Busyrane in his own element. Say, look at that mob! We better get going!" As the pursuers came nearer, thrashing the brushes of the nearby groves in their hunt, Shea could see that they were a fine collection of monsters: men with animal heads, horrors with three or four arms, bodies and faces rearing from the legless bottoms of snakes.

They straddled the broom. Shea chanted:

"By oak, ash, and yew,
The high air through,
To slay this vile catiff,
Fly swiftly and true!"

THE BROOM started with a rush, up a long slant. As it shot out of the grove and over the heads of the nearest of the pursuit, they broke into a chorus of shouts, barks, roars, meows, screams, hisses, bellows, chirps, squawks, snarls, brays,

growls, and whinnies. The effect was astounding.

But Shea's mind was occupied. He was pleased to observe that this homemade broom seemed fairly steady though slower than the one he had hexed in the land of Scandinavian myth. He remembered vaguely that in aërial dogfighting the first step is to gain an advantage in altitude.

Up they went in a spiral. Busyrane came into view on his wivern, beating toward them. The enchanter had his sword out, but as the wivern climbed after them Shea was relieved to see that he gaining.

A couple of hundred feet above the enemy he swung the broom around. Over his shoulder he said: "Get ready; we're going to dive on them." Then he noticed that Belphebe was gripping the stick with both hands, her knuckles white.

"Ever been off the ground before?" he asked.

"N-nay. Oh, Squire Harold, this is a new and very fearsome thing. When I look down—" She shuddered and blinked.

"Don't let a little acrophobia throw you. Look at your target, not the ground!"

"I essay."

"Good girl!" Shea nosed the broom down. The wivern glared up and opened its fanged jaws. He aimed straight for the red-lined maw. At the last minute he swerved aside; heard the jaws *clomp* vainly and the bowstring snap.

"Missed," said Belphebe. She was looking positively green under her freckles. Shea, an old roller-coaster addict, guessed how she felt.

"Steady," he said, nosing up and then dodging as the wivern flapped toward them with surprising speed. "We'll try a little shallower dive."

Shea came down again. The wivern turned, too. Shea didn't bank far enough, and he was almost swept into the jaws by the centrifugal force of his own turn. They went *clomp* a yard from the tail of the broom. "Whew," said Shea on the climb. "Hit anything?"

"Busyrane, but it hurt him not. He bears armor of proof and belike some magic garment as well."

"Try to wing the wivern, then." They shot past the beast, well beyond reach of the scaly neck. *Twunk*! An arrow fixed itself among the plates behind the head. But the wivern, appearing unhurt, put on another burst of speed and Shea barely climbed over its rush, with Busyrane yelling beneath him.

Belphebe had her acrophobia under control now. She leaned over and let go three more arrows in rapid succession. One bounced off the reptile's back plates. One went through a wing membrane. The third stuck in its tail. None of them bothered it.

"I know," aid Shea. "We aren't penetrating its armor at this range. Hold on; I'm going to try something."

They climbed. When they had good altitude, Shea dove past the wivern. It snapped at them, missed, and dove in pursuit.

The wind whistled in Shea's ears and blurred his vision. Forest and glade opened out below; little dots expanded to the pursuers on foot. Shea glanced back; the wivern hung in space behind, its wings half furled. He leveled out, then jerked the broom's nose up sharply. The universe did a colossal somersault and they straightened away behind the wivern. In the seconds the loop had taken, the beast had lost sight of them. Shea nosed down and they glided in under the right wing, so

Shea tried the flaming-sword spell. For a wonder, nothing went wrong with it, and he carved his way out—

close they could feel the air go *fuff* with the wing beat.

Shea got one glimpse of Busyrane's astonished face before the wing hid it. The scaly skin pulsed over the immense flying muscles for one beat. "Now!" he barked.

Twunk! Twunk! Belphebe had drawn the bow hard home, and the arrows tore into the beast's brisket.

There was a whistling screar , then catastrophe. The wide wing whammed down on the aviators, almost knocking Shea from his seat. They were no longer flying, but tumbling over and over, downward. The top of a tree slashed at Shea's face. Dazedly, he heard the wivern crash and tried to right the broom. It nosed up into a loop and hung. A

cry from behind him, receding toward the earth, froze him. He saw Belphebe tumble into the grass, twenty feet down, and a wave of the monster men close over her.

XVI.

SHEA MANHANDLED his broomstick around, fervently wishing he had a lighter one—a pursuit job. By the time he got it aimed at the place where he had last seen Belphebe, there was no sign of her or of Busyrane either. The wivern sprawled bloatedly in the grass, with hundreds of the enchanter's allies swarming round it.

Shea drew his épée and dove at the thick of them. They screeched at him, some of them producing clumsy breast bows. He swooped toward a monster with a crocodile head as the strings began snapping. The arrows went far behind, but just as Shea stiffened his arm for the gliding thrust, Crocodilehead thinned to a puff of mist. The épée met no resistance. As Shea held his glide, parallel with the ground, he found the crowding monsters disappearing before him. He pulled up, looking back. They were materializing behind. More arrows buzzed past.

He circled, cutting another swath through them. No sign of Belphebe.

At the third charge an arrow caught in his cloak. The flint head of another drove through his boot and a quarter inch into his calf. The goblins were learning antiaircraft fire. But of Belphebe there was still no sign, and now the ghost men were streaming toward him out of the woods on all sides. In every direction they were hopping, yelling, drawing their crude bows.

He climbed out of bowshot and circled, looking. No luck. It would have to be some other way. He felt slightly sick.

He went up higher, till the vast green expanse of Loselwood spread out before him. The sun was well up. Under it he fancied he could see the region where he had tangled with the Da Derga. Beyond should be the edge of the forest, where he and Chalmers had met their first Losels.

An hour of cruising showed him a clearing with a little garden, a thatched cottage, and a circular palisade of pointed stakes around the whole. He helixed down slowly.

A man came out of the wood and entered the palisade through a gate. Shea caught a glimpse of red face and black beard as his own shadow, whisking across the grass, brought the man's eyes upward. The man dashed into the cottage as if all the fiends of hell were after him. In a moment two armored men came out. The shield of one bore the striking black-and-white gyronny of Sir Cambell.

> "By oak, ash and yew;
> My broomstick true,
> Like a dead leaf down falling,
> So softly fall you!"

That was not quite the right way to put it, as Shea immediately learned. The broom settled slowly, but, remorselessly literal, carried the imitation of a dead leaf to the point of a dizzying whirl. Cottage, forest, and waiting knights came to him in a spinning blur.

Shea felt ground under his feet. He staggered dizzily.

Artegall roared: "By'r Lady, 'tis the enchanter's varlet!" His sword came out. *Wheep!*

Shea said: "You're just the man I'm looking for—"

"That I warrant!" His laugh was a nasty bark. "But you'll accom-

plish no more magician's tricks on me. I have a protection, which is more than you have against this!" He shook the sword and swung it back.

"*Wait* a minute!" cried Shea. "I can explain, honest—"

"Explain to the devils of hell, where you soon will be!"

AT THAT moment Britomart and Cambina came out of the cabin. Shea wondered frantically whether to run toward them, try to start the broom, or— What was that? A set of little patterns was faintly visible on Artegall's breastplate as he turned in the morning sun. They were the type of pattern that would be left by soldering on brass oak leaves and then prying them off.

"Hey!" he said. "You're the guy who showed up in the oak leaves at Satyrane's tournament and won the second prize but didn't stop to collect it!"

"Huh? How knew you— What mean you, rogue?"

"Just what I say. You fought for the challengers, and Britomart knocked you off your pony, didn't she?"

" 'Tis to be said . ah—" Artegall turned his scowl on Britomart. She glared back.

"Come, good friends," said Cambina, "no variance. I proclaim it was Sir Artegall, for I penetrated his disguise. Come, Artegall, confess; you cannot hide the sun at the bottom of a bucket."

"I suppose I must," growled the knight. "I did but wish to make proof whether I were as strong in the lists as I seemed, or whether certain of the knights would rather fall off their horses than oppose the queen's justiciar." He turned to Britomart. "You have a rude way toward an affianced husband, my lady!"

Shea caught Britomart's eye and winked violently. She turned on Artegall a look that would have melted granite. "Ah, my dear lord, had I but known! Yet surely you shall feel no shame at that one overthrow, for 'twas the combination of that enchanted ebony spear I bear and your own horse's stumbling, neither alone sufficient." She reached for his mailed arm. "When we are wed I shall leave these broils and tournaments to you."

Cambell and Cambina looked at Britomart, then at each other. The look implied they had never seen her act *that* way before. Shea repressed a grin. The brawny blonde learned fast.

Artegall smiled shamefacedly. "Why, dearest dame, that were a great sacrifice indeed. I knew not you cared so." His voice hardened. "But we have here a most villainous young rascal."

"No rascal," said Britomart, "but a true and loyal squire, whom I have sworn to my service and that of the queen."

"Then what of his soaring through the sky like a bug or witch? Nay, he's of the tribe of enchanters—"

"Not so," interrupted Cambina. "His magic is white, even as my own; and my art tells me that this Harold de Shea will speak the truth if you'll let him."

Artegall scowled, but asked: "Then what's the truth he would speak?"

Shea told his story quickly before a new argument could start. "That is good truth, I guarantee," said Cambina, when he had finished, "and Belphebe is in deadly danger."

"Then why stand we here at words?" snapped Artegall. "Ho, woodcutter! We start at once.

Food and horses, as soon as they may be had, for all of us."

Shea disapproved of this cavalier treatment, but didn't feel called upon to comment. He said: "Going to collect an army?"

"Nay, not I. Time presses us too close. Here we must count on our own good arms and Cambina's magic. Art afraid?"

"Try me."

"There's a stout younker." The frown in Artegall's brows cleared a bit. "I will be just and admit I held you wrong."

THE MOON in this world, Shea observed, set only twelve or thirteen minutes later each night, instead of the fifty minutes later of his own earth. He and his four companions were crouched at the edge of the opening that held Busyrane's unseen castle. They did not attempt it till the moon had disappeared.

As they crossed the open space Shea whispered: "I'm afraid I can't find the gate. Too dark to see my landmarks."

"Small loss," answered Cambina. Shea saw her dimly, doing things with her wand. Out of nothing grew a faint phosphorescence that resolved itself into a row of bars.

Cambina pointed the wand at it. The instrument elongated, flexing itself like some tame worm. The tip groped with the lock, inserting itself gently. There was a faint click.

The wand withdrew, then poked its end through the bars. Under the night song of the insects there came a faint grate as the bolt slid back. The gate was open.

As they tiptoed through, the infinitesimal jingle of the knight's armor sounded to Shea's ears like an earthquake in a kitchenware factory. Cambina pointed. Over their heads on the wall appeared a sentry, visible only as a cloak and hood, glowing with a phosphorescence almost too faint to be visible. The hood swung its black cavity toward them. Cambina pointed her wand, and the sentry froze in that position.

Light and music streamed from the windows of the great hall. Shea, leading because of his knowledge of the place and the fact that his tread was most nearly soundless, was heading for the door when he tripped over a huge, hairy leg.

With simultaneous grunts a pair of Losels who had been stretched out on the steps rolled to their feet. While the one nearest was fumbling in the dark for his club, Shea drove the épée through the creature's throat. Behind him he heard the other's club swish up—

But the club failed to come down. He looked around and saw the Losel, club aloft, frozen to a statue like the sentry. The other Losel was expiring with quiet bubbling noises.

Cambina did things with her wand, and the door of the building swung open. There were light and noise within, but no one to see them. Across the corridor in which they stood was the entrance to the great hall, the door slightly ajar. Within, the revelers were too occupied with their grand ball to be watching the door.

Shea beckoned the four heads close to his and breathed: "This corridor runs around to the serving entrance."

"Are there other doors beside those two?" asked Artegall, and when Shea shook his head went on: "Then do you, squire, with Cambell and Cambina, take that entrance. Here Britomart and I will take our stand; for this is the place where they will naturally come and we are, I think, the best men-at-arms."

Heads nodded. Shea and the

other two stole down the corridor. Just before they reached the service entrance, an imp crossed the corridor from the kitchen with a tray in his hands.

He saw them. Cambell bounded forward and cut the imp in two: The bottom half of the imp ran back into the kitchen. There was an instant uproar.

The three ran a few steps to the service entrance and flung open the door.

Shea got one brief static picture of a roomful of magicians and red-lipped women looking at him. Some had their mouths open. Busyrane sat at one end of the horseshoe facing him, and he thought he recognized Chalmers. Before he could be certain, the photograph came to frenzied life.

He turned to face the noise behind. Out of the kitchen boiled a mass of imps and hobgoblins, bearing spits, knives, rolling pins. Shea neatly spitted the first on his épée, dodging the counter. The imp leaped backward off the blade and came on again. Behind him Shea heard the roar of the Chapter, Cambell's deep war cry, and the whack of swords against his shield.

"I can . . . handle these," panted Cambina. Her wand darted to and fro, freezing imp after imp. The rest started to run.

Shea turned back toward the hall, just in time to thrust through the throat a magician trying to roll under Cambell's legs with a knife, while others engaged the knight's attention.

THE NOISE was ear-splitting. Cambell filled the door, and at the far end Britomart was doing equally well. Artegall had leaped into the hall and was swinging his great sword with both hands. His temper might be bad, but he was certainly a good man to have around in a rough house.

The lights dimmed to negligible red sparks. Cambina cried a spell and waved her wand; the magicians glowed with blue phosphorescence in the dark. The scene became that of a photographic negative—a wild one, with some of the enchanters turning themselves into winged things to flee, others hurling themselves upon the fighters, striking sparks.

A whole press at once bore down on Cambell. Shea saw a glowing head fly from its shoulders, and himself thrust past the knight's shield arm against something that gave before his blade. Then he was out in the room. A green mist whirled about him, plucking. A pink flash and it was gone.

Right in front of him a magician became a monstrous crab. Shea dodged it, clashed weapons with a still-human enchanter, thrust him through, and then went down as the falling man grabbed him by both ankles. He was stepped on four times before he kicked himself free. Colors, sparks, flashes of light danced about the room.

Just ahead a whole crowd were boiling around Artegall. Shea took one step and found himself confronting Busyrane in person. Busyrane's eyes were twice their normal size with slit pupils, like a cat's. For all his venerable appearance the enchanter was swinging a huge sword as though it were a foot rule.

Shea gave back, almost slipping on a spot of blood. Busyrane came leaping nimbly after, slashing. The big sword, half seen, whirled in a continuous snaky blur. Shea parried, parried, backed, parried, and parried. The wall was against him.

There was no time even for ri-

postes against this demoniac attack. Shea took the last refuge of an outmatched fencer; leaped into a corps-a-corps and grabbed Busyrane around the waist with his free arm.

The magician seemed made of rubber and piano wire. One hand clawed at Shea's face. Shea ducked and buried his face in Busyrane's cloak, trying to trip him. The magician fumbled for a dagger. Shea reflected that the weapon was probably poisoned.

But just at this moment Busyrane was jerked backward, dragging Shea to his knees after him. Shea threw himself back and up. Then he saw what was the matter with Busyrane. Around the Archimage's neck was clasped a pair of large, knobby hands. Just that and nothing more. Around the room above flitted a dozen more pairs of those disembodied hands, swooping at the throats of the enchanters.

Shea lunged. But Busyrane was made of stern stuff. He got the hands loose, his own sword up, and came back with a low cut. Shea lunged again. The magician, groggy from that strangling grip, had strength enough left to beat off Shea's remises and one-twos. Shea tried a coupé and one-two and felt his point go home. He held his lunge, stabbing and stabbing.

Down went Busyrane. Shea looked around. The windows of the hall were jammed with the bats and owls and things into which the magicians had changed themselves. They were beaten. The knobby hands clustered around them, tearing off wings and wringing necks with fine impartiality.

The lights flared up again. It was all over. Dead and dying monsters about the great hall changed back into men. Cambell, Artegall, and Britomart picked themselves up from the floor, slowly and with effort. Cambina drooped against the service door, almost fainting.

Artegall's deep voice boomed: "Ha! Lives one yet?" Shea turned to see him kick over a table and swing back the big blood-dripping sword. He gave a leap and clutched the arm in time.

"Thank you, Harold," said Chalmers from the floor where the table had been. Florimel was beside him. He was squeezing the neck of a bottle in both hands. The large joints of those hands were familiar. Shea realized that the disembodied pairs that had wrought such havoc among the enchanters were out-size copies of his partner's.

"Nice work, doc," remarked Shea. To Artegall he said: "Don't. He's on our team."

Chalmers gave a hand to Florimel. "You observe," he remarked, "the improvement in my technique, although, goodness gracious! I didn't expect the hands to be quite as efficacious as that!" He looked round the room, where nearly half the corpses showed marks of strangulation.

XVII.

Cambell carried his wife to a seat and supported her. He said: "'Twill pass. She is much foredone with the labor of defeating those enchanters' spells, and 'tis well she did so or we were all dead men."

Artegall growled: "Master Harold has slain this Busyrane, a good end for as bad a man as drew breath; and Master Reed has slain more than any two of us with his own magic."

"Said I not they were true and gallant gentlemen?" said Britomart.

"True, my sweet." He wiped the sword on the skirt of an enchanter's robe. "Kneel, sirs!"

Shea and Chalmers went to their knees, but Cambell plucked at their sleeves. "Nay, on one knee only."

Artegall tapped each on the shoulder. "I dub you knights. Be brave, honest, and true in the name of our gracious majesty. Rise, Sir Harold; rise, Sir Reed."

Shea's irrepressible grin broke out as he stood up. "How does it feel to be named official racket buster, doc?"

"Quite . uh . normal, I assure you. The really important fact about this evening's work is that I've discovered the secret of quantitative control. Frege's definition of number solves the problem with relation to the calculus of classes."

" 'The number of things in a given class is the class of all classes that is similar to the given class'?"

"Precisely. By treating numbers as classes—that is, the number two as the class of all pairs, the number three as the class of all triples, we can—"

"Say!" cried Shea. "Where's Belphebe?"

"I don't recall having seen the young woman. As I was saying, once the problem of introducing a quantitative element—"

"But I've got to find Belphebe! Busyrane caught her this morning. He must have brought her here."

Nobody else had seen her. Florimel offered: "There be gruesome great dungeons below. Mayhap—"

"How do you get to them?"

Chalmers said: "Before you go searching, Harold, I have a spell against magicians that you really must learn."

"To hell with that! She may be down there now!"

"I know. But Duessa and Grantorto certainly escaped this uh . . . holocaust, and there may be others."

"Be warned," rumbled Artegall. "The rash falcon strikes no game, Sir Harold. We shall need all and more than all the protection we can get to prowl those passages."

Cambell spoke up: "Cambina, I greatly fear, can do no more for the present, gentle sirs."

"O. K., O. K.," groaned Shea. "Why didn't you use this spell before, doc?"

"Why," said Chalmers, innocently, "it would have blown me back into my own universe! And I have too much to live for here." He exchanged beams with Florimel. "You see, Harold, the casting of a spell produces on both the caster and the uh . . . castee an effect analogous to that of an electrostatic charge. Ordinarily this has no particular effect and the charge . . uh dissipates in time. But when a person or thing has passed from one spacetime vector to another, he or it has broken a path in extradimensional spacetime, creating a permanent . uh . . line of weakness. Thereafter the path is easier for him—or it—to follow. If I accumulated too much magicostatic charge at one time, it would, since this charge is unbalanced by the fact that I am at one end of this spacetime path . uh . it would be reaction propel—"

"Oh, for God's sake! Let's have the spell now and the lecture later."

"Very well." Chalmers showed Shea the spell, relatively simple in wording but calling for complex movements of the left hand. "Remember, you've been doing spells, so you probably have a considerable charge at present."

THEY LEFT Florimel and Cambina with Cambell and divided into two parties. Artegall went with Shea.

Smooth stone changed to rough

ashlar as they went down. Their torches smoked, throwing long shadows.

The passage turned and twisted till Shea had no idea where he was in the labyrinth. Now and then they stopped to listen—to their own breathing. Once they thought they heard something and cautiously crept to peer around a corner.

The sound was that of water dripping down a wall. They went on. Shea couldn't help glancing over his shoulder now and then. Artegall, his iron shoes echoing, paused to say: "I like this not. For half an hour we have followed this passage into nothing."

A side passage sprang away. Shea proposed: "Suppose you go a hundred steps ahead, and I'll go the same distance this way. Then we can both come back and report."

Artegall growled an assent and set off. Shea, gripping his épée, plunged into the side passage.

At a hundred paces the passage was the same, receding into blackness ahead of him.

He returned to the T. It seemed to him that he reached it in less than half the time it had taken him to leave it. There was no sign of Artegall, just black emptiness inclosed in rough stone.

"Artegall!" he called.

There was no answer.

He yelled: "Sir Artegall!" The tunnels hummed with the echo, then were silent.

Shea found himself sweating. He poked at the stone before him. It seemed solid enough. He was sure, now, that this T had appeared in the passage after he passed it, about halfway to where he had gone.

He set off to the right. If Artegall had gone that way, he should catch him. An impulse made him stop and look back. The leg of the T had already disappeared.

He ran back. There was nothing but solid stone on both sides.

His skin crawled as if a thousand spiders were scuttling over it. He ran till he began to puff. The passage bent slightly, one way, then another. There was no end to it.

When he rounded a corner and came on a human being, his nerves seemed to explode all at once.

The person shrieked. Shea recognized Belphebe.

"Harold!" she cried.

"Darling!" Shea spread his arms —torch, épée and all—to take her in them.

But she backed away. "How now? Is there to be a price on my rescue?"

"But but . . . I mean—"

"Knew you not that I am affianced to Squire Timias?"

Shea stared blankly.

Belphebe said: "Nay, good squire, take it not so to heart. I had thought it known to the world, or I should have told you. The fault is mine."

Shea sagged. He felt very tired. "Well," he said with forced cheerfulness, "the main thing's getting out of this damned maze. How did you get down here?"

"I sprained my ankle in my fall this morning. And Busyrane's minions—"

"Hah, hah, hah!" Grantorto, large as life, stepped through the side of the wall. "The two mice who would kill cats!"

Shea crouched for a flèche. But Grantorto made a pass toward him. Something wrapped round his legs, like an invisible octopus. He slashed with the épée, but met no resistance.

"Nay, there shall be a new Chapter," continued Grantorto, "with my

presence as Archimage. First, I shall prove my powers on your bodies—a work worthy of my genius, doubt it not!"

Shea strained at the invisible bonds. They crept up his body. A tentacle brushed, then gripped his sword arm. Too late he remembered he should have thrown his épée.

But his left arm was free. If Belphebe was going to marry a guy named Timias, what did it matter if he got squirted back by the rocket effect of a magicostatic charge?

He dropped the torch and raced through the spell. Grantorto, just opening his mouth for another pontifical pronouncement, suddenly looked horrified. He shrieked, a high womanish scream. He dissolved into a mass of little yellow flames.

Pfmp!

WALTER BAYARD, one of Shea's three colleagues at the Garaden Institute for Psychological Research, jumped a foot. One minute he had been alone in Harold Shea's room, reading Harold Shea's notes. Then, with a gust of air, Shea was before him in a battered Robin Hood outfit, apparently menacing him with an épée.

The new arrival threw the weapon clattering into a corner and dropped into a chair.

"Where's doc?" asked Bayard.

"Stayed behind. He liked it there."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Walter," said Shea, "I am going to bed. I'm tired. I'm sick. Honest. The name for the sickness is unrequited love. But I think I know the antidote." He picked up the telephone and dialed a number. "A fifth of rye," he said, adding the name and address.

"Can't I stay and help you be sick?"

"Go to hell. Oh, damn!" He was looking at his hands, which showed a lot of little blisters. He dialed another number and ordered: "—a quart of calamine lotion. You heard me, a quart."

"What the devil?" said Bayard.

Shea managed to grin. "It *was* poison ivy I tied the broom with. Now I *am* sick. I'll be unswollen in about a week. And now will you please be so kind as to get the hell out? Good night, Walter."

As Bayard left, he heard Shea break into song. It was familiar; one of the Gilbert-and-Sullivan airs with which old Chalmers used to distort the atmosphere:

"Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me, lackadaydee!
He sipped no sup and he craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a layde."

TOMBI SINK

by J. VALE DOWNIE

● The white engineers stirred up the very ancient god of the African natives — and the god came out to do battle with the steel god of the engineers!

BEYOND the lake a red rind of moon burst from behind the dark shadow of the Tombi Range.

Three men sat in front of a green wall tent, on a sand dune fringed with tamarinds, overlooking the lake, with a pitcher of rum swizzle on a folding table before them. The tent had an elevated snake-proof floor, an extension of which, roofed with canvas, formed the porch now occupied by the three white men.

A Kru trooper in khaki and hobnailed boots, crunched back and forth on the malodorous shingle below. Fifty paces south, on lower ground, a boxlike bulk with a curious protuberance like the bowsprit of a ship, except that it had a knee joint in the middle, was similarly guarded. A Kru boy in a breechcloth, with a flagman's lantern beside him, sat on the boom, while another trooper in khaki paced back and forth alongside. In front of the machine a short section of completed trench, twenty-five feet wide and fifteen feet deep, extended to the water's edge. A stone's throw beyond the trench a driftwood fire surrounded by a circle of black bodies marked the Kru labor camp. Behind the dune occupied by the green tent lay a region of tamarind bush, reedy tarns infested with crocodiles and other malignant sauropoda; ant hills like Japanese pagodas; death vocal and horrific; death sinuous and silent. Beyond this mile-wide neck of desolation the black flood of the Luckungo moved majestically southward.

Captain Latour's cheroot glowed to a cherry point, the reflection of which glistened balefully from his monocle as he scowled into the darkness.

"I do not know which is worse—the odor or the drums," he said in English.

"It's horse and horse," said Panshott, the American.

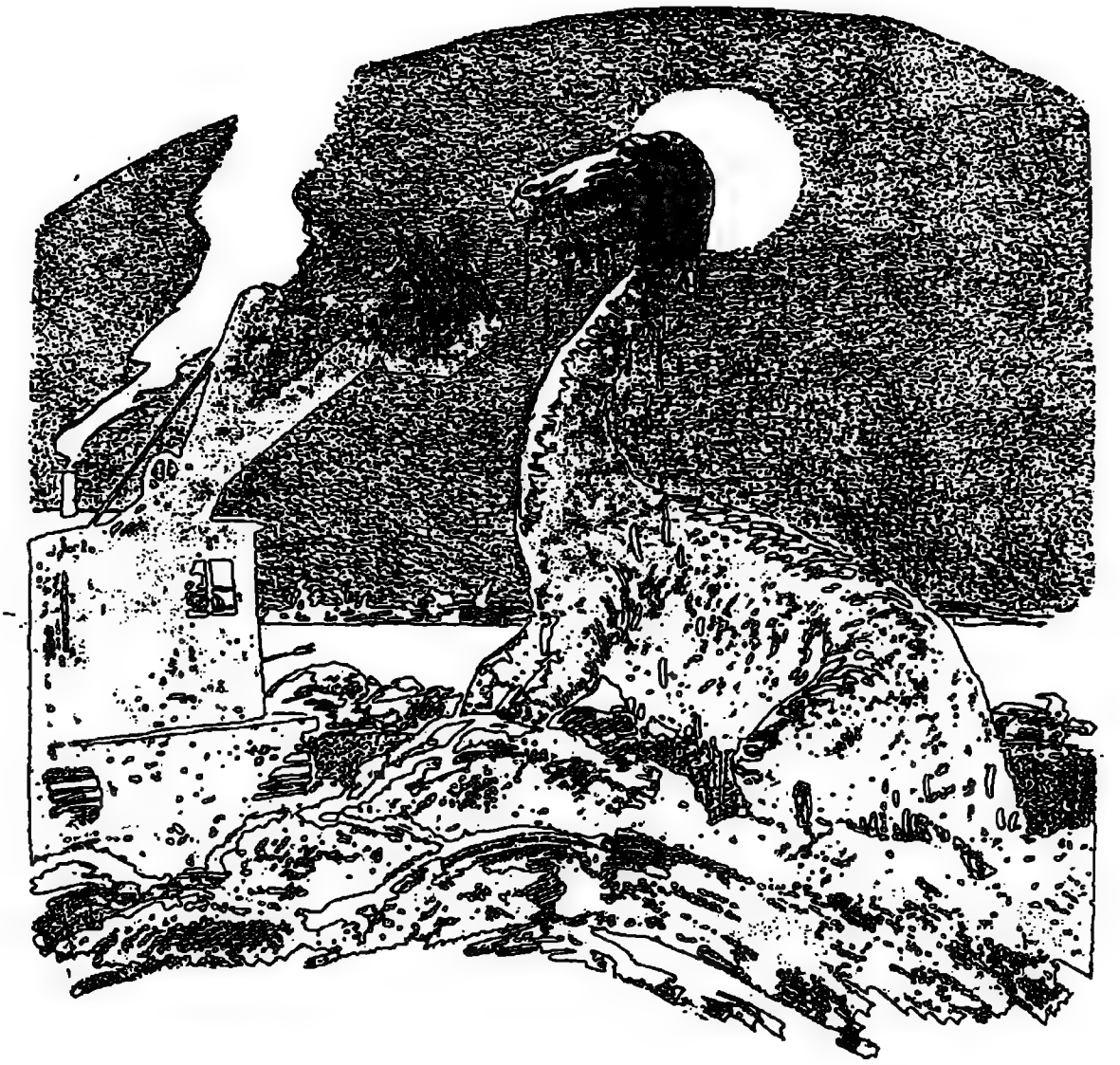
"The adoration of mephitism seems to be a characteristic of many aboriginal superstitions," observed Professor Micard. Panshott said the Chicago Drainage Canal couldn't hold a candle to it, thereby distracting the famous archæologist from the development of an interesting thesis.

"It's one queer smell," he added. "Like musk."

"Abominable," protested Latour. "Like alligator stench, but worse; and we have already remarked the puzzling fact that there are no crocodiles in the Tombi."

"Come to think of it, I don't believe there are any in the Drainage Canal, either," drawled Panshott.

The captain shrugged. Perhaps



the American's outwardly carcless attitude nettled him. Professor Micard now lighted a fresh cigarette at the stump of the one that threatened to ignite his trim white goatee. He spoke soothingly to the French officer.

"Perhaps it is better that we should not attempt to explain all the dark mysteries of this dark continent. The nose, as you may be aware, has never become entirely civilized. It is capable of absorbing awkward and uncomfortable notions —if you comprehend my meaning. It is best that we refrain from inhaling something that, for lack of a better term, I must describe as—madness!"

"*Enfin!*" burst from the soldier. "Tomorrow I shall move this camp across the isthmus."

"You will merely," warned Micard, "exchange the aroma of Tombi Lake for that of the Luckungo River—"

"Which wasn't so hot," put in the shovel runner.

"And you will still hear drums."

"The drums I can endure," Latour said.

"Well, I can't," grunted Panshott. "I'd trade my adenoids for a good night's sleep, any time. What do you suppose stirred up all this rumpus in the first place, professor? You know all about these dark daffies. What's got into them?"

Professor Micard removed the cigarette from his lips with his left hand, lifted the glass of rum from the taboret with his right and sipped the potent mixture.

"It is quite apparent that you have disturbed the snake," he said, with an air of regret devoid of jocularity.

"You mean that we have upset the Bantus," Latour said, "by starting the excavation of our canal?"

"In effect, yes," said Micard.

"Baloney," breathed Panshott, pulling upon his straight-stemmed brier. "My guess is the Bantus were coming down with witch fever before we left Kabinda."

THERE WAS a Bantu village at the upper end of the lake. It consisted of a hundred cone-topped grass huts, with a large one shaped like a candle snuffer in the center. The candle snuffer was the Temple of the Snake. In it a witch doctor, with a corps of assistant wizards, decorated with red and green feathers, necklaces of sharks' teeth and human ears, offered sacrifices and perpetual adoration to the spirit of the Old Unmentionable One, who was now angry.

Micard said:

"Regard! You and M'sieu' Panshott as agents for the Union Minere Belgique de las bas Luckungo, have annoyed the Old One Of Whom We Do Not Speak. That is well understood, is it not?"

"Banana oil!" laughed Panshott. A match flared over the long-stemmed brier, illuminated bronzed cheeks, black and brooding brows, a lank figure in duck trousers and cotton undershirt, prone in a steamer chair.

"Not at all," persisted the older man. "It is your ditch that is making all this hubbub. For myself, I am an innocent onlooker—a scientist. You gentlemen are about to pour the sacrilegious waters of the Luckungo into the Very Old And Nameless One's sacred dwelling, viz., the Tombi Sink."

"And the Old One can't take it, eh?"

Panshott laughed rather mirthlessly. His muscles were sore from a hard day over the levers of his fifty-ton hoe. He said:

"All the same, professor, it's *huile de banan*. You are in this thing the same as we are. You are as keen about digging that ditch as anybody. You are hoping every minute that my bucket will pull up some of the Old Snake's bones, aren't you? You're not kidding anybody, Professor Micard. What's it all about, captain? Do you really think those shines would cut loose and start throwing assegais at white people?"

"They've already begun," said the Frenchman quietly. "They destroyed a mission at Nngana, twenty miles upriver yesterday. They killed two German missionaries and carried off their daughter, a girl of nineteen. One of my runners reported the matter to me this morning. I have sent for troops!"

"So," whispered the professor. "It *has* begun." He did not seem greatly surprised.

Panshott stood up—peered northward, up the lake.

"Look! What do you suppose they're up to now?"

Latour and Professor Micard

leaped to their feet. All three men ran to the sandy promontory.

At the northern end of the lake fireflies seemed madly to dance among the reeds, or up and down the beach. Presently the lights took rough form in parallel lines, from the beach to the village beyond, now invisible in the darkness. Later the lights came partially to rest on a single dark plane, assumed a different pattern. Black bulks, spined with flaring sparks, pushed out upon the lake. A fierce, multitudinous ululation, softened by distance, came over the dark water.

"It is the Propitiation of the Snake," said Professor Micard, gravely. "The black bulk in the middle of the canoes is the Raft of Sacrifice. In former times there would have been a maiden decked with flowers and tied with grass ropes, on that raft. Latterly the Belgian government has, as Captain Latour is aware, induced the Bantus to employ goats instead of human beings in sacrificial ceremonies."

"I wish I could believe that they haven't reverted to their ancient practices," Latour said fervently. "How many canoes do you make, M'sieu' Panshott?"

"Six," replied the engineer. "Two in front, two behind and one on either side of the raft."

"Fifty warriors to a canoe," muttered the soldier, grimly. "Three hundred in all—to our twenty troopers. I hope you are right, Professor Micard, in assuming that this movement is merely a native ceremonial."

CAPTAIN LATOUR strode to the edge of the bluff and called an order to the sentry, who departed toward the lower camp on the double-quick.

He then went into the tent and came back with a pair of field glasses.

The raft, towed apparently by the two forward canoes, which proceeded single file, came slowly down the lake. In twenty minutes it had reached the center. It was now possible to make out details of the picture. Four torches, or fire baskets, burned at the corners of the floating altar, which was now turned adrift. The six canoes, like giant centipedes or water bugs, moved around the raft in a circle of sputtering flares, glistening, dripping paddles and glittering black torsos.

The white men had been taking turns with the glass. Professor Micard now handed it back to its owner. "Look closely at the sacrificial object," he said.

Latour put the glass to his eyes.

"Name of a thousand devils—it is not a goat!" he clipped out. "It is a white man—or woman. This ceremonial we cannot permit!"

Panshott took the instrument.

"The circle of canoes is breaking," he said. "The show must be over. The Indians are heading back toward the upper end of the lake."

"Good! I will take the scow and row out immediately to the raft," said the officer. "I must know what is there!"

"How about letting *me* go?" Panshott cut in. "You can form your men on the beach and cover my retreat if the Bantus come back to get their bait."

"A good suggestion," said the professor. "M'sieu' Panshott can, I am sure, be trusted to return with the sacrificial object, if a rescue proves to be possible."

Latour was forced to agree that this was better strategy. The voyage to the raft would be a perilous undertaking. The Kru soldiers would be nearly useless without their leader.

Joe Panshott ran into the tent for his belt and holster, which carried a

.38 automatic and ammunition, and joined the captain, who led the way down the slope of the dune to a small wooden pier near the mouth of the canal, where a flat-bottomed bateau was moored. He jumped into the boat and picked up the oars. Latour pushed him out on the oily water.

Ten minutes hard work with the oars brought the heavy scow close to the raft. He heard a moaning sound and a muttered prayer.

"*Lieber Gott im Himmel—*"

"Hold it, lady; I'm taking you off," the engineer shouted comfortingly.

"*Gott sei danke* . . . hurry oh, hurry!"

The surface of the lake was like purple, leaded glass, frozen with terror and totally unreal. The girl's voice seemed to come from some ghostly limbo beyond the reach of human hands. Panshott choked—the stench was worse—and an involuntary shiver caused the oars to fall from his hands. He recovered them and shipped them dripping and phosphorescent in the scow. Something frightful came to him over the lake, or out of the lake, as he leaped to the raft, the mooring rope in his hand. He felt that he had been warned by a vague and terrible presence. The impression he received was entirely indescribable, but it caused a cold sweat to break upon his forehead. Something must have happened, he told himself, to set him thinking the things that were in his brain. What?

There was only one answer that gave him any satisfaction at all. He could hear nothing, see nothing, in the situation that was not capable of rationalization, but one thing.

A wave that could not have been made by the distant war canoes was lapping sharply up against the flat, overhanging prow of his boat! A wave two feet high that could only have been made by a large craft—a river steamer, for example. There was no such boat on the Tombi!

He released the hysterical girl, who lay on the rough couch of woven reeds in the center of the raft.

"Into the boat . . and be careful," he warned the girl, as he helped her to her feet. She seemed able to walk. She had not been injured.

"*Ach* . . the horrible creatures . . I have heard them breathing. The monsters . . *schrechlich und zauberisch*, I could hear them!"

"You heard the Bantu paddlers."

"No . . it was not the Bantus. . *Ach, du lieber Gott*, I shall go mad!"

"Not now. There, sit in the middle of the boat. Don't look into the water. There is nothing there, but you might think there was, in your present frame of mind."

PANSHOTT had been so engrossed in taking the girl off the raft that he had forgotten the Bantu flotilla. Now, suddenly, as he took up the oars and started for shore, he was reminded of his peril. A chorus of angry shouts came over the water. A war canoe, with a feathered, painted demon dancing in its prow, bore down upon him. This would be the chief wizard, master of the ceremonial.

The German girl screamed.

At this moment the crash of gunfire came from the beach; but the distance was too great for accurate marksmanship. Panshott ceased rowing and drew his gun.

Inexplicably, the canoe drew no closer; instead it swung about, paddles churning. For a moment the engineer thought this retreat was the effect of the volley of rifle fire from the shore. A moment later he changed his mind.

A strange sound came from the darkness toward the eastern side of the lake, from beneath the now fully risen, torch-red moon. It was like the crash of a mountain cataract. At that moment the heavy, musky and infinitely disgusting odor that he had noticed before, was intensified beyond endurance. He hastily tied a handkerchief over his face, fought down his nausea. A wave two feet high rocked the boat. The girl clutched the thwart and bowed her head in prayer.

Then he saw it—a dark, columnar bulk—under the moon. It was like a shadow of black darkness, indistinct against the purple deeps of the Tombi range. Presently he saw that there was a head, for the head passed over the moon. The head was revolving slowly on top of that column like a steamboat funnel. Then jaws opened and the moon lay like a golden nut in that horrible angle.

Panshott groaned. "What that?" he whispered.

The girl's sobs, the lapping of the unaccustomed surf against the scow, the sudden mad churning of fifty paddles, accompanied by a reedy wail of terror, answered his query after a fashion. In a cold sweat Panshott fumbled with the oars, began to row frantically with crabbing blades toward the distant shore. It seemed to his throbbing eyes and stunned imagination that the scow was being pulled backward by some underwater creature toward the east side of the Tombi Sink. So persistent and powerful was this hallucination that he began to have the feeling that the lake had been tilted upward behind him and that he was sliding downward over a hideous, greased surface to a nameless doom.

He was drenched with perspiration and ready to sink from exhaustion ten minutes later when the scow grounded on the beach and he heard, incredulously, the voice of Captain Latour behind him.

Latour carried the girl to the beach and delivered her to the care of Professor Micard.

"There's something out there that's all wrong," Panshott croaked. "I got a glimpse of it and then lost it when a rag of cloud covered the moon; but I think it's coming this way. I've got to find out what it is."

"I see nothing," said Latour, his glass to his eyes.

"It's still pretty well over to the other side of the lake. Can't you smell it?"

"That . . . I smell the Tombi, yes . . . but—".

"I'm going to start the hoe and swing the searchlight over the lake."

"Good idea. The Bantus may return. We scared them off with a volley."

"It wasn't your guns that scared them. They saw it, too."

"Ah. Is it possible, M'sieu' Panshott, that you have succumbed to the spell of the Bantu wizard?"

"You know damn well I haven't."

PANSHOTT STRODE across the beach, up the sandy slope along the completed ditch, to his machine. He climbed into the cab with a thin sense of satisfaction, if not of security.

He pulled a starter switch and an unmuffled Diesel roared over Africa. A bright electric eye beamed over Tombi Sink, splashed like silver on the low range of hills a mile away, swung left and right like the sword of supernal justice.

It found the thing!

From the back water rose the glistening black column of the neck to a head that looked much like the forward two-thirds of the body of a very large crocodile. The body of

the beast was concealed below the water. It was wading on the bottom, or swimming—Panshott could not tell which. The scissorine snout was broader and flatter than that of the "croc."

It was unimaginable, incredible, grotesque. Panshott wanted to laugh. He *did* laugh. Fortunately the racket of his motor drowned the sound of that laughter, as it did the shout of terror that went up from the Kru camp.

Micard had told him and Latour what might happen, he now realized. At least, he had strongly hinted. Naturally they had refused to believe. A German paleontologist had contended that German East Africa had been the home of the Gigantosaurus. The Germans had found skeletal remains which had been removed on river boats and ocean steamers to European museums. The monster, said they, had lived two hundred million years ago and had been from eighty to one hundred and forty feet long. Professor Micard believed that the Belgian Congo had been the home of even larger reptiles than the carnivore Gigantosaurus and that the Tombi Sink had been the saurian graveyard of the Continent. The Bantus had still another idea. *They thought one of these prehistoric monsters still lived in the lake—and the Bantus had been right!*

Panshott went cold. His unbelief vanished like mist before the sun. The Very Old Unmentionable One had risen from the incalculable depths—from the aching, ichorous fluid of the Sink—to avenge the desecration of his primordial abode.

The monster was interested, apparently, in one thing—the searchlight.

Now something dark drifted into the pathway of the beam. It was the floating altar. The beast struck downward swiftly and scattered the logs of the raft like matchwood.

For a few moments the monster remained motionless, its head tilted speculatively, like that of an enormous turkey cock; then it moved rapidly toward the shore. It was only now that Panshott got a true conception of its gigantic size.

The sharp, instinctive impulse came to him to turn off the light, which was drawing death and devastation upon them all; but, with his hand on the overhead switch that controlled the beam, he saw Captain Latour with a file of soldiers appear on the beach opposite the end of the trench. The officer's drawn saber glittered in his hand as he leveled it across the lake. The little company of twenty black troopers stood to attention, raised their guns and began to fire. The light would aid their defense. If Latour wanted it shut off, he would signal.

Panshott rapidly took account of his situation. The life of every person at the post was threatened by this intolerable peril. If the beast reached shore and found the entrance to the dry canal, it might reach and damage the machine. This possibility prompted the operator to engage the crawler gear and move back a hundred feet from the excavation. He was able to do this in a few minutes time without disturbing the direction of the searchlight beam.

As he throttled the motor, after moving, he heard a rising rumble of voices and, suddenly, a horde of black bodies appeared in front of the machine—dancing, hallooing and waving their arms. He recognized them at once as the Kru laborers from the camp below the canal. Their own wizard, a fat and lazy Kru with a battered silk hat and a Sam Browne belt, who functioned as

a straw boss, was in their midst. A moment later the mob swarmed close to the machine and sank to their knees, facing the shovel. More accurately, they hurled themselves in a jittering, squealing anguish of horror to the ground. Each man bent over, smote his forehead to the sand, rose with arms stretched forward and bowed again. They moved all together, intoning rhythmically a strange chant of worship, fear, faith and desperate supplication.

"H-ho—H-ho—H-ho—H-ho!"

Panshott knew that this deep-lunged, primordial aspirate, forceed through two hundred palsied throats by dread-retched diaphragms, was not a Kru word.

They were trying to pronounce the name of the white man's jinn!

For a moment the full significance of this was not clear; then he understood. The Kru men, who had openly flouted the magic of the Bantus, had, with equal frankness taken the white man's jinn as their deity. The Bantus knew this, if the whites did not; and the Old One knew it, of course. They had burned their bridges behind them. They had sweated under the blistering sun to get the five-ton crates of machinery off the Luckungo boat. They had strained upon grass cables under a rickety jib crane, lashed to superhuman exertion in the assembly, the composition and erection of the white man's idol, by a six-foot, black-browed outlander. The black-browed white man was the priest, or wizard of the jinn and he presently made it walk haltingly, but miraculously, up the muddy bank of the river and across the narrow isthmus to the lake. In brief, they, the Kru men, had brought the white man's magic to the Tombi and were participating in the digging of a ditch that was to pour Luckungo floods into the home of the Very Old One. There was no question or compromise about this. They were on the white man's side of the fence. They had become devotees of the hoe, a false and outlandish deity as each, in his own cold soul well knew; now they could look nowhere else for succor.

The shrieking of the new clutches, the wispy—and doubtless, to Kru minds, sacred—odors of singed copper and asbestos, the clank and grind of unworn caterpillar plates and travel pinions, the deep-toned Diesel, sounding defiance to the smothering night—all these spoke comfort to the hearts of the quaking Kru, gave them hope, threw them into jittering adoration. But the hoe had moved as though to retreat—to desert his dusky neophytes; and that plunged icy terror to their vitals.

GROTESQUELY, now, two white figures appeared among the prone black bodies, picking their way hastily, as though fleeing, like Dante and his guide, through some horrible chamber of the damned. It was Professor Micard and the grass-skirted white girl. He held her by the hand. She hid her face in the crook of her left elbow and stumbled on.

Why? Why had they not stayed in the tent, or fled across the isthmus to the river?

The old man shouted, but his words were lost in the rattle of the exhaust, the moaning chant of the blacks. His frantic desire was clear.

Panshott hunched down—reached for the girl's hand. She put one bare foot on the crawler belt as he hoisted her into the cab. He then lifted the professor up in the same manner and assisted him to crawl into the narrow passageway behind, between the steel wall of the cab and the great

drums and engine. The interior of the cab was dimly lighted by a single small electric bulb over the drums.

The German girl was young and very pretty. He had not had time to observe this fact before and he didn't have time now; but consciousness of it was forced upon him somehow as she passed him into the passage. She was terrified beyond expression and clung to the operator's hand with both her own.

Panshott shouted at the professor: "What's wrong? Why didn't you stay at the tent?"

The answer to this question was startling. It did not come from the little Belgian scientist. A missile struck the wall of the cab with force. Professor Micard opened his mouth to speak. What he said was unintelligible; but he laid his finger significantly against the wall plate at his side, where the iron point of an assegai struck through half an inch. An able black arm had heaved that javelin, for the plates were heavy-gauge sheet steel.

Panshott grabbed the sliding door at his left and hauled it shut as a clatter of spears struck the sides and the roof and a wail of terror went up from worshipers in front.

The Bantus were attacking. They were sweeping down the isthmus from their village, obviously, intent upon the destruction of the impious whites and renegade Kru men.

A half dozen of the Kru men writhed and wrenched the arrows and assegais of the Bantus from their bodies.

The engineer grabbed a lever and swung his big machine a quarter-circle left, which had the effect of directing the searchlight northward and putting the attacking party of Bantus in the center of a brilliantly lighted stage.

Instantly Panshott opened fire with his automatic through the front window of the cab and a gigantic Bantu, befeathered and clay-daubed, brandishing shield and spear, leaped high in the air and fell dead beside the machine!

Panshott continued firing until the clip in his automatic was exhausted; then quickly reloaded. Arrows and spears rained on the corrugated-iron roof, but none came through.

The engineer concluded that the Bantus had not seen the Old One rising from the lake, which had been concealed from them by the low dunes as they came down the isthmus. They were still, perhaps, unaware of that amazing visitation, now rapidly approaching in the darkness.

But, if the Bantus had doubted the potency of the white man's magic, the blinding white eye of his jinn and the deadly accuracy of Panshott's pistol restored their respect. In sixty seconds they broke and fled northward into the tamarind bush, from which now came the howl of a questing leopard, the hideous barking of hyenas.

The operator swung the shovel back a quarter revolution to the right. He stamped and set the rotation brake facing toward the lake.

The Kru men had vanished southward, toward their camp or such concealment from their enemies as they could find.

The Old One had reached the shore. It was now in the dry trench. Its columnar neck rose treelike above the dunes.

Captain Latour had lost his kepi, but had retained his monocle, which was always in place, like a flag of battle, in time of stress. He stood on the edge of the excavation and pointed upward with his straight sword.

Six staggering Kru soldiers, with mumbling, frothing lips, lifted their guns and tried to aim at the little orange-green eyes in that constantly moving head.

The movement of that head was a horror past expression. It swayed with a certain slow dignity backward and forward and, at the same time, revolved still more slowly upon the axis of the neck. In profile the scissorslike snout opened widely as though in response to some reflexive shortening of cords of the neck, disclosing a bluish-red maw large enough to envelop the body of a rhinoceros, and closed with a crash like that of coupling freight trains.

In a way this maneuver resembled the performance of a papier-mâché dragon, in a float at the carnival of roses; but, at the same time, the nodding movement suggested a mentality far from the mechanical. It conveyed an impression of introspection and thought, of an infinitely sinister self-communing, of knowledge ancient and malevolent, timeless and cruel.

Like automatons, mouths open and flecked with foam, the panting Kru men worked the levers of their Schneider carbines. They pumped lead at the head, the towering neck, the lurching body. The lead slugs had as much effect as tennis balls—no more. Field artillery, with high explosive shells, might have been effective. Captain Latour had nothing of the sort at the post. Even the dynamite and blasting powder which he had ordered for use on the excavation of the canal had not yet arrived.

The monster's head lurched backward and two single-toed feet appeared on the rim of the cut. A sound like the ripping of a sail told when its hind feet were torn from the muddy bottom of the trench.

The strangling stink of death and age-old villainy clutched their throats as the Old One dragged its dripping, cuirassed enormity out of the ditch and stood before them.

It lurched toward the machine, stopped, erected itself and, with a whiplike movement of the long neck, impossibly sharp and convulsive, uttered a cry like the lugubrious howl of a hyena, magnified to infinity, or the "gobble" of an unimaginable wild turkey.

Outraged nature could endure no more. The Kru soldiers threw down their rifles and fled.

WITHOUT a conscious plan of defense, Panshott seized the levers that controlled the clutches of the mighty

boom and bucket drums. The boom rose like a giant knee prepared to kick some Gargantuan football; then it straightened at the hinge until the inverted steel bucket, armed with four six-foot manganese chisels, hung twenty-five feet in the air.

A metallic rattle on the cab door sent cold shivers through the engineer's body; but immediately he heard a voice and breathed more freely. It was not a Bantu assegai. Without removing his eyes from the hoisted bucket and the weaving monster's head, Panshott unlatched the door with his left hand and pushed it back. Captain Latour crawled up over the caterpillar belt and squeezed into the cab deck.

"*Merci, m'sieu'*. Ah—the professor and the sacrificial object are here, I see. It is well, that. We shall die tranquilly together."

"Not yet," shouted the shovel operator. "Maybe I can stop him. I'm going to drop the bucket on his back, if I can. It weighs twenty-two hundred and I can power-hack him if I get a lucky break. I'm almost as fast as he is. That is, if I can get over him with the boom he won't be able to dodge me."

"*Bon*—do it!" pleaded Latour. "You have not a moment to lose, M'sieu' Panshott. Ah—this does not surprise me, this diabolical one. I have seen him in my dreams, since the drums began to beat; but never before, unless I had been drinking absinthe!"

"Is that so? Well, he's news to me," shouted the American.

"The data of the Bantu wizard was more accurate than we believed," Latour said.

Professor Micard made a remark that was lost in the roar of the exhaust—doubtless in disparagement of the German paleontologist, who had fleered at the possibility of finding saurian remains in the valley.

The sauropod faced the machine speculatively for a moment.

Then it gobbled again. The characteristic cry was accompanied by that same whiplike, convulsion of the neck and a distention of the jaws, followed by crashing closure. Over the staccato roar of the Diesel, the hideous sound hurtled into the African night.

In the following instant and with lightning speed, the jaws opened, the head darted forward, revolving upon its side, and the jaws closed over the steel bucket. The monster thus escaped the downward pointed bucket-teeth.

The machine slewed slightly under the terrific wrenching pressure of the monster's attack. The operator met this danger by setting his slewing-clutch with sufficient engagement to meet the sidewise pressure, which was not, as yet, too great but might soon become more serious. In some respects the hoe might hold its own with the sauropod, but certainly not in a wrestling bout. If the full strength of that powerful neck were to be exerted in a sidewise thrust, the result would be disaster. The Old One could even, as soon as he learned his opponent's weakness, push the machine over backward, buckling and wrecking the joint of the boom.

One stroke and one only was available for counterattack, and that was a downward, hacking blow which must fall, perforce, upon the monster's back, which was heavily armored with bony plates like roofing tiles with a spinal ridge of disklike plates on edge that ran for several feet up the base of the neck. Panshott could strike the beast only where its armor was heaviest. To do this he must release the bucket from the monster's jaws and, somehow, get his boom past the weaving neck.

"What is wrong with the motor?" cried Latour. "It seems to be laboring."

"Yeah," Panshott replied. He knew quite well that he was taking the full capacity of the engine at normal speed through slewing and hoisting clutches. For a moment he said no more. Then:

"Hey, captain!"

Latour bent forward until his chin was on Panshott's shoulder.

"*Oui, m'sieu'.*"

"Is that rear shaft assembly smoking badly?"

"No more than *le manivelle superieure—*"

"All right. We'll have to change it. I'm going to do something that may wreck the machine," he shouted, his eyes fixed on the boom, "but we've got to make a play of some sort and it's the only out I can see. If it fails, it will be for lack of power. The trouble is that I have to play this baby like a fish—all directions at once. That means that I have to take power through the hoisting drums and slewing clutches simultaneously. You don't do that digging. It's hard on the machine and it puts an awful load on the motor—"

"I comprehend perfectly, m'sieu'."

"If I don't keep pressure on him all the time he'll upset us. I'm letting him play with that bucket, but I'm yanking downward all the time on the bail. He's holding up twenty thousand pounds right now. Do you get it?"

"*Oui!* It is instantly perceptible," barked the officer. "That Old One—he thinks, perhaps, that he will swallow the *pelle a tranche!*"

"Yes. But he hasn't got a good hold on it yet. He's loosened some rivets—that's all. But that's why I have to keep the slew-clutch working in and out, as he keeps swinging right and left. It's raising hell with my brake and clutch linings. They're red-hot."

"I have remarked it," comforted Latour vociferously.

"So what? So we gotta go," howled Panshott. "I'm going to leave my card on this baby right now. Listen, captain—I'm going to throw in the travel clutch and ram him. For that I'll need more power. Suppose you get your fingers on the throttle sextant behind my right shoulder and, when I say go, you give her the gun! Comprenny?"

"*Parfaitment, m'sieu'.*"

Panshott embraced two of the bank of six levers skillfully with his left arm, hand and elbow; seized a shorter lever with his right hand. A foot-pedal released the travel brake.

"Go!" howled Panshott.

LATOUR PUSHED the throttle bar. The Diesel roared. Clutches burned redly in the suffocating cab. The machine rocked and shivered—rocked and teetered again. From beneath came the clank of crawling, scrabbling plates.

The hoe advanced upon her enemy!

The scaly tower weaved, writhed and strained—but was bent backward slowly by the charging machine. Crawler belts ground channels in the loose sand, but did not lose entirely their tractive power. The hoe advanced, inch by inch, and every inch put more twist in that towering neck.

This, then, was the shovel-engineer's strategy—to force the relaxation of the jaw muscles, if possible, by twisting the monster's neck. That hold, he believed, could be broken. The laws of mechanics were all against the Old One at this point—as in the case of the alligator. The long snout was like a pair of tongs with short handles and long pinch-

ing members. Every strain exerted in that long snout would be terrifically compounded in the hinges of the jaw.

The machine was within arm's reach of the hideous body of the beast when it was forced to release its hold on the bucket.

Again it uttered that unearthly roar of anger and defiance—a broken, explosive howl, unlike that of any creature Panshott had ever seen.

The operator seized this opportunity. He brought the trenching bucket hacking down on the reptile's body.

The steel teeth threw flakes of fire when they struck the bony, spinal armor as though the bucket had been dropped on a limestone ledge.

Panshott lifted his boom and dropped the bucket again with increased force, hacking with his bucket drum as the boom descended. The first blow had loosened some of the bony plates; the second buried the teeth of the bucket a foot in the base of the sauropod's neck.

Again burst that unearthly cry over the black isthmus of the Luckungo.

The Old One fled. It dragged the fifty-ton hoe halfway to the ditch before the operator was able to release the bucket. Two of the manganese chisels were ripped from the bucket lip but not completely detached.

Swinging its head toward the lake and extending its neck like a jib crane, it waddled rapidly toward the rim of the canal, dropped over and, ten seconds later, crashed into the lake, its ancient home.

WITH INCREDIBLE speed the towering neck moved away from the shore, the long snout swinging once or twice from side to side.

Panshott, rotating his searchlight, quickly found the monster far out upon the lake. The shuddering occupants of the shovel cab leaped to the ground and ran to the edge of the dune—all but the operator of the shovel, who remained with his machine. The professor, Captain Latour and the sacrificial object stared with horror and absorption at the picture now presented.

A war canoe of the Bantus fled before the ancient, unspeakable terror of their clan. Fifty paddles churned the fetid pool. It was to be assumed that they had returned stealthily to search for the sacrificial victim or, perhaps, to participate in the attack upon the post, with the horde that had come down the isthmus. Whatever their intention, they now found themselves directly in the path of the Very Old One's flight.

Now the enraged and wounded monster sped after the fleeing canoe like an incredibly swift and gigantic swan.

The long neck arched, the scissorine snout opened, darted downward, snapped up the befeathered chief wizard, who was standing in the prow of the canoe, as a swan gobbles a baby frog. A shrill, quavering chorus of terror vibrated over the terrible tarn of Tombi.

A moment the black, bare legs of the wizard kicked and writhed as they were brandished like the devil's besom against the saffron moon. A moment they zigzagged silently across the moon, like the darting shadow of a flying bat. Then they were whipped beneath the black waters of eternal night.

Fifty black forms struggled in the lake around their overturned canoe and a low murmur of agony drifted shoreward from that ghastly tarn.

That cry seemed to rise and flee from the Tombi Sink, pursued by—silence!

IT

by THEODORE STURGEON

● It wasn't vicious; it was simply curious—and very horribly deadly!

It walked in the woods.

It was never born. It existed. Under the pine needles the fires burn, deep and smokeless in the mold. In heat and in darkness and decay there is growth. There is

life and there is growth. It grew, but it was not alive. It walked unbreathing through the woods, and thought and saw and was hideous and strong, and it was not born and it did not live. It grew and moved about without living.

It crawled out of the darkness and hot damp mold into the cool of a morning. It was huge. It was lumped and crusted with its own hateful substances, and pieces of it dropped off as it went its way, dropped off and lay writhing; and stilled, and sank putrescent into the forest loam.

It had no mercy, no laughter, no beauty. It had strength and great intelligence. And—perhaps it could not be destroyed. It crawled out of its mound in the wood and lay pulsing in the sunlight for a long moment. Patches of it shone wetly in the golden glow, parts of it were nubbled and flaked. And whose dead bones had given it the form of a man?

It scrabbled painfully with its half-formed hands, beating the ground and the bole of a tree. It rolled and lifted itself up on its crumbling elbows, and it tore up a great handful of herbs and shredded them against its chest, and it paused and gazed at the gray-green juices with intelligent calm. It wavered to its feet, and seized a young sapling and destroyed it, folding the slender trunk back on itself again and again, watching attentively the useless, fibered splinters. And it squealed, snatching up a fear-frozen field-creature, crushing it slowly, letting blood and pulpy flesh and fur ooze from between its fingers, ru down and rot on the forearms.

It began searching.

Kimbo drifted through the tall grasses like a puff of dust, his bushy tail curled tightly over his back and his long jaws agape. He ran with an easy lope, loving his freedom and the power of his flanks and furry shoulders. His tongue lolled listlessly over his lips. His lips were black and serrated, and each tiny pointed liplet swayed with his doggy gallop. Kimbo was all dog, all healthy animal.

He leaped high over a boulder and landed with a startled yelp as a long-eared cony shot from its hiding place under the rock. Kimbo hurtled after it, grunting with each great thrust of his legs. The rabbit bounced just ahead of him, keeping its distance, its ears flattened on its curving back and its little legs nibbling away at distance hungrily. It stopped, and Kimbo pounced, and the rabbit shot away at a tangent and popped into a hollow log. Kimbo yelped again and rushed snuffling at the log, and knowing his failure, curvetted but once around the stump and ran on into the forest. The thing that watched from the wood raised its crusted arms and waited for Kimbo.

Kimbo sensed it there, standing dead-still by the path. To him it was a bulk which smelled of carrion not fit to roll in, and he snuffled distastefully and ran to pass it.

The thing let him come abreast and dropped a heavy twisted fist on him. Kimbo saw it coming and curled up tight as he ran, and the hand clipped stunningly on his rump, sending him rolling and yipping down the slope. Kimbo straddled to his feet, shook his head, shook his body with a deep growl, came back to the silent thing with green murder in his eyes. He walked stiffly, straight-legged, his tail as low as his lowered head and a ruff of fury round his neck. The thing raised its arms again, waited.

Kimbo slowed, then flipped himself through the air at the monster's throat. His jaws closed on it; his teeth clicked together through a mass of filth, and he fell choking and snarling at its feet. The thing leaned down and struck twice, and after the dog's back was broken, it sat beside him and began to tear him apart.

"Be back in an hour or so," said Alton Drew, picking up his rifle from the corner behind the wood box. His brother laughed.

"Old Kimbo 'bout runs your life, Alton," he said.

"Ah, I know the ol' devil," said Alton. "When I whistle for him for half an hour and he don't show up, he's in a jam or he's treed something wuth shootin' at. The ol' son of a gun calls me by not answerin'."

Cory Drew shoved a full glass of milk over to his nine-year-old daughter and smiled. "You think as much o' that houn'-dog o' yours as I do of Babe here."

Babe slid off her chair and ran to her uncle. "Gonna catch me the bad fella, Uncle Alton?" she shrilled. The "bad fella" was Cory's invention—the one who lurked in corners ready to pounce on little girls who chased the chickens and played around mowing machines and hurled green apples with a powerful young arm at the sides of the hogs, to hear the synchronized thud and grunt; little girls who swore with an Austrian accent like an ex-hired man they had had; who dug caves in haystacks till they tipped over, and kept pet crawfish in tomorrow's milk cans, and rode work horses to a lather in the night pasture.

"Get back here and keep away from Uncle Alton's gun!" said Cory. "If you see the bad fella, Alton, chase him back here. He has a date with Babe here for that stunt of hers last night." The preceding evening, Babe had kind-heartedly poured pepper on the cows' salt block.

"Don't worry, kiddo," grinned her uncle, "I'll bring you the bad fella's hide if he don't get me first."

Alton Drew walked up the path toward the wood, thinking about Babe. She was a phenomenon—a pampered farm child. Ah well—she had to be. They'd both loved Clissa Drew, and she'd married Cory, and they had to love Clissa's child. Funny thing, love. Alton was a man's man; and thought things out that way; and his reaction to love was a strong and frightened one. He knew what love was because he felt it still for his brother's wife and would feel it as long as he lived for Babe. It led him through his life, and yet he embarrassed himself by thinking of it. Loving a dog was an easy thing, because you and the old devil could love one another completely without talking about it. The smell of gun smoke and the smell of wet fur in the rain were perfume enough for Alton Drew, a grunt of satisfaction and the scream of something hunted and hit were poetry enough. They weren't like love for a human, that choked his throat so he could not say words he could not have thought of anyway. So Alton loved his dog Kimbo and his Winchester for all to see, and let his love for his brother's women, Clissa and Babe, eat at him quietly and unmentioned.

His quick eyes saw the fresh indentations in the soft earth behind the boulder, which showed where Kimbo had turned and leaped with a single surge, chasing the rabbit. Ignoring the tracks, he looked for the nearest place where a rabbit might hide, and strolled over to the

stump. Kimbo had been there, he saw, and had been there too late. "You're an ol' fool," muttered Alton. "Y' can't catch a cony by chasin' it. You want to cross him up some way." He gave a peculiar trilling whistle, sure that Kimbo was digging frantically under some nearby stump for a rabbit that was three counties away by now. No answer. A little puzzled, Alton went back to the path. "He never done this before," he said softly. There was something about this he didn't like.

He cocked his .32-40 and cradled it. At the county fair someone had once said of Alton Drew that he could shoot at a handful of salt and pepper thrown in the air and hit only the pepper. Once he split a bullet on the blade of a knife and put two candles out. He had no need to fear anything that could be shot at. That's what he believed.

THE THING in the woods looked curiously down at what it had done to Kimbo, and moaned the way Kimbo had before he died. It stood a minute storing away facts in its foul, unemotional mind. Blood was warm. The sunlight was warm. Things that moved and bore fur had a muscle to force the thick liquid through tiny tubes in their bodies. The liquid coagulated after a time. The liquid on rooted green things was thinner and the loss of a limb did not mean loss of life. It was very interesting, but the thing, the mold with a mind, was not pleased. Neither was it displeased. Its accidental urge was a thirst for knowledge, and it was only—interested.

It was growing late, and the sun reddened and rested awhile on the hilly horizon, teaching the clouds to be inverted flames. The thing threw up its head suddenly, noticing the dusk. Night was ever a strange thing, even for those of us who have known it in life. It would have been frightening for the monster had it been capable of fright, but it could only be curious; it could only reason from what it had observed.

What was happening? It was getting harder to see. Why? It threw its shapeless head from side to side. It was true—things were dim, and growing dimmer. Things were changing shape, taking on a new and darker color. What did the creatures it had crushed and torn apart see? How did they see? The larger one, the one that had attacked, had used two organs in its head. That must have been it, because after the thing had torn off two of the dog's legs it had struck at the hairy muzzle; and the dog, seeing the blow coming, had dropped folds of skin over the organs—closed its eyes. Ergo, the dog saw with its eyes. But then after the dog was dead, and its body still, repeated blows had had no effect on the eyes. They remained open and staring. The logical conclusion was, then, that a being that had ceased to live and breathe and move about lost the use of its eyes. It must be that to lose sight was, conversely, to die. Dead things did not walk about. They lay down and did not move. Therefore the thing in the wood concluded that it must be dead, and so it lay down by the path, not far away from Kimbo's scattered body, lay down and believed itself dead.

ALTON DREW came up through the dusk to the wood. He was frankly worried. He whistled again, and then called, and there was still no response, and he said again, "The ol' flea-bus never done this before," and shook his heavy head. It was

past milking time, and Cory would need him. "Kimbo!" he roared. The cry echoed through the shadows, and Alton flipped on the safety catch of his rifle and put the butt on the ground beside the path. Leaning on it, he took off his cap and scratched the back of his head, wondering. The rifle butt sank into what he thought was soft earth; he staggered and stepped into the chest of the thing that lay beside the path. His foot went up to the ankle in its yielding rottenness, and he swore and jumped back.

"*Whew!* Sompn sure dead as hell there! Ugh!" He swabbed at his boot with a handful of leaves while the monster lay in the growing blackness with the edges of the deep footprint in its chest sliding into it, filling it up. It lay there regarding him dimly out of its muddy eyes, thinking it was dead because of the darkness, watching the articulation of Alton Drew's joints, wondering at this new uncautious creature.

Alton cleaned the butt of his gun with more leaves and went on up the path, whistling anxiously for Kimbo.

Clissa Drew stood in the door of the milk shed, very lovely in red-checked gingham and a blue apron. Her hair was clean yellow, parted in the middle and stretched tautly back to a heavy braided knot. "Cory! Alton!" she called a little sharply.

"Well?" Cory responded gruffly from the barn, where he was stripping off the Ayrshire. The dwindling streams of milk plopped pleasantly into the froth of a full pail.

"I've called and called," said Clissa. "Supper's cold, and Babe won't eat until you come. Why —where's Alton?"

Cory grunted, heaved the stool out of the way, threw over the stanchion lock and slapped the Ayrshire on the rump. The cow backed and filled like a towboat, clattered down the line and out into the barnyard. "Ain't back yet."

"Not back?" Clissa came in and stood beside him as he sat by the next cow, put his forehead against the warm flank. "But, Cory, he said he'd—"

"Yeh, yeh, I know. He said he'd be back fer the milki '. I heard him. Well, he ain't."

"And you have to— Oh, Cory, I'll help you finish up. Alton would be back if he could. Maybe he's—"

"Maybe he's treed a blue jay," snapped her husband. "Him an' that damn dog." He gestured hugely with one hand while the other went on milking. "I got twenty-six head o' cows to milk. I got pigs to feed an' chickens to put to bed. I got to toss hay for the mare and turn the team out. I got harness to mend and a wire down in the night pasture. I got wood to split an' carry." He milked for a moment in silence, chewing on his lip. Clissa stood twisting her hands together, trying to think of something to stem the tide. It wasn't the first time Alton's hunting had interfered with the chores. "So I got to go ahead with it. I can't interfere with Alton's spoorin'. Every damn time that hound o' his smells out a squirrel I go without my supper. I'm gettin' sick and'—"

"Oh, I'll help you!" said Clissa. She was thinking of the spring, when Kimbo had held four hundred pounds of raging black bear at bay until Alton could put a bullet in its brain, the time Babe had found a bearcub and started to carry it home, and had fallen into a freshet, cutting her head. You can't hate a dog that has saved your child for you, she thought.

"You'll do nothin' of the kind!" Cory growled. "Get back to the house. You'll find work enough there. I'll be along when I can. Dammit, Clissa, don't cry! I didn't meant to— Oh, shucks!" He got up and put his arms around her. "I'm wrought up," he said. Go on now. I'd no call to speak that way to you. I'm sorry. Go back to Babe. I'll put a stop to this for good tonight. I've had enough. There's work here for four farmers an' all we've got is me an' that . . . that huntsman.

"Go on now, Clissa."

"All right," she said into his shoulder. "But, Cory, hear him out first when he comes back. He might be unable to come back this time. Maybe he . . . he—"

"Ain't nothin' kin hurt my brother that a bullet will hit. He can take care of himself. He's got no excuse good enough this time. Go on, now. Make the kid eat."

Clissa went back to the house, her young face furrowed. If Cory quarreled with Alton now and drove him away, what with the drought and the creamery about to close and all, they just couldn't manage. Hiring a man was out of the question. Cory'd have to work himself to death, and he just wouldn't be able to make it. No one man could. She sighed and went into the house. It was seven o'clock, and the milking not done yet. Oh, why did Alton have to—

Babe was in bed at nine when Clissa heard Cory in the shed, slinging the wire cutters into a corner. "Alton back yet?" they both said at once as Cory stepped into the kitchen; and as she shook her head he clumped over to the stove, and lifting a lid, spat into the coals. "Come to bed," he said.

She lay down her stitching and looked at his broad back. He was twenty-eight, and he walked and acted like a man ten years older, and looked like a man five years younger. "I'll be up in a while," Clissa said.

Cory glanced at the corner behind the wood box where Alton's rifle usually stood, then made an unspellable, disgusted sound and sat down to take off his heavy muddy shoes.

"It's after nine," Clissa volunteered timidly. Cory said nothing, reaching for house slippers.

"Cory, you're not going to—"

"Not going to what?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought that maybe Alton—"

"Alton!" Cory flared. "The dog goes hunting field mice. Alton goes hunting the dog. Now you want me to go hunting Alton. That's what you want?"

"I just— He was never this late before."

"I won't do it! Go out lookin' for him at nine o'clock in the night? I'll be damned! He has no call to use us so, Clissa."

Clissa said nothing. She went to the stove, peered into the wash boiler, set it aside at the back of the range. When she turned around, Cory had his shoes and coat on again.

"I knew you'd go," she said. Her voice smiled though she did not.

"I'll be back durned soon," said Cory. "I don't reckon he's strayed far. It is late. I ain't feared for him, but—" He broke his 12-gauge shotgun, looked through the barrels, slipped two shells in the breech and a box of them into his pocket. "Don't wait up," he said over his shoulder as he went out.

"I won't," Clissa replied to the

closed door, and went back to her stitching by the lamp.

THE PATH up the slope to the wood was very dark when Cory went up it, peering and calling. The air was chill and quiet, and a fetid odor of mold hung in it. Cory blew the taste of it out through impatient nostrils, drew it in again with the next breath, and swore. "Nonsense," he muttered. "Houn'-dawg. Huntin', at ten in th' night, too. Alton!" he bellowed. "Alton Drew!" Echoes answered him, and he entered the wood. The huddled thing he passed in the dark heard him and felt the vibrations of his footsteps and did not move because it thought it was dead.

Cory strode on, looking around and ahead and not down since his feet knew the path.

"Alton!"

"That you, Cory?"

Cory Drew froze. That corner of the wood was thickly set and as dark as a burial vault. The voice he heard was choked, quiet, penetrating.

"Alton?"

"I found Kimbo, Cory."

"Where the hell have you been?" shouted Cory furiously. He disliked this pitch-blackness; he was afraid at the tense hopelessness of Alton's voice, and he mistrusted his ability to stay angry at his brother.

"I called him, Cory. I whistled at him, an' the ol' devil didn't answer."

"I can say the same for you, you . . . you louse. Why weren't you to milkin'? Where are you? You caught in a trap?"

"The houn' never missed answerin' me before, you know," said the tight, monotonous voice from the darkness.

"Alton! What the devil's the matter with you? What do I care if your mutt didn't answer? Where—"

"I guess because he ain't never died before," said Alton, refusing to be interrupted.

"You *what?*" Cory clicked his lips together twice and then said. "Alton, you turned crazy? What's that you say?"

"Kimbo's dead."

"Kim . . oh! Oh!" Cory was seeing that picture again in his mind— Babe sprawled unconscious in the freshet, and Kimbo raging and snapping against a monster bear, holding her back until Alton could get there. "What happened, Alton?" he asked more quietly.

"I aim to find out. Someone tore him up."

"Tore him up?"

"There ain't a bit of him left tacked together, Cory. Every damn joint in his body tore apart. Guts out of him."

"Good God! Bear, you reckon?"

"No bear, nor nothin' on four legs. He's all here. None of him's been et. Whoever done it just killed him an'—tore him up."

"Good God!" Cory said again. "Who could've—" There was a long silence, then. "Come 'long home," he said almost gently. "There's no call for you to set up by him all night."

"I'll set. I aim to be here at sunup, an' I'm goin' to start trackin', an' I'm goin' to keep trackin' till I find the one done this job on Kimbo."

"You're drunk or crazy, Alton."

"I ain't drunk. You can think what you like about the rest of it. I'm sticken' here."

"We got a farm back yonder. Remember? I ain't going to milk twenty-six head o' cows again in

It was very curious about the dog's attack—so I took the dog apart—

the mornin' like I did jest now, Alton."

"Somebody's got to. I can't be there. I guess you'll just have to, Cory."

"You dirty scum!" Cory screamed. "You'll come back with me now or I'll know why!"

Alton's voice was still tight, half-sleepy. "Don't you come no nearer, bud."

Cory kept moving toward Alton's voice.

"I said"—the voice was very quiet now—"*stop where you are.*" Cory kept coming. A sharp click told of the release of the .32-40's safety. Cory stopped.

"You got your gun on me, Alton?" Cory whispered.

"Thass right, bud. You ain't a-trompin' up these tracks for me. I *need* 'em at *sun-up.*"

A full minute passed, and the only sound in the blackness was that of Cory's pained breathing. Finally:

"I got my gun, too, Alton. Come home."

"You can't see to shoot me."

"We're even on that."

"We ain't. I know just where you stand, Cory. I been here four hours."

"My gun scatters."

"My gun kills."

Without another word Cory Drew turned on his heel and stamped back to the farm.

BLACK and liquescent it lay the blackness, not alive, not understanding death, believing itself dead. Things that were alive saw and moved about. Things that were not alive could do neither. It rested its muddy gaze on the line of trees at the crest of the rise, and deep within it thoughts trickled wetly. It lay huddled, dividing its new-found facts, dissecting them as it had dissected live things when there was light, comparing, concluding, pigeonholing.

The trees at the top of the slope could just be seen, as their trunks were a fraction of a shade lighter than the dark sky behind them. At length they, too, disappeared, and for a moment sky and trees were a monotone. The thing knew it was dead now, and like many a being before it, it wondered how long it must stay like this. And then the sky beyond the trees grew a little lighter. That was a manifestly impossible occurrence, thought the thing, but it could see it and it must be so. Did dead things live again? That was curious. What about dismembered dead things? It would wait and see.

The sun came hand over hand up a beam of light. A bird somewhere made a high yawning peep, and as an owl killed a shrew, a skunk pounced on another, so that the night shift deaths and those of the day could go on without cessation. Two flowers nodded archly to each other, comparing their pretty clothes. A dragon fly nymph decided it was tired of looking serious and cracked its back open, to crawl out and dry gauzily. The first golden ray sheared down between the trees, through the grasses, passed over the mass in the shadowed bushes. "I am alive again," thought the thing that could not possibly live. "I am alive, for I see clearly." It stood up on its thick legs, up into the golden glow. In a little while the wet flakes that had grown during the night dried in the sun, and when it took its first steps, they cracked off and a little shower of them fell away. It walked

up the slope to find Kimbo, to see if he, too, were alive again.

BABE LET the sun come into her room by opening her eyes. Uncle Alton was gone—that was the first thing that ran through her head. Dad had come home last night and had shouted at mother for an hour. Alton was plumb crazy. He'd turned a gun on his own brother. If Alton ever came ten feet into Cory's land, Cory would fill him so full of holes he'd look like a tumbleweed. Alton was lazy, shiftless, selfish, and one or two other things of questionable taste but undoubted vividness. Babe knew her father. Uncle Alton would never be safe in this county.

She bounced out of bed in the enviable way of the very young, and ran to the window. Cory was trudging down to the night pasture with two bridles over his arm, to get the team. There were kitchen noises from downstairs.

Babe ducked her head in the washbowl and shook off the water like a terrier before she toweled. Trailing clean shirt and dungarees, she went to the head of the stairs, slid into the shirt, and began her morning ritual with the trousers. One step down was a step through the right leg. One more, and she was into the left. Then, bouncing step by step on both feet, buttoning one button per step, she reached the bottom fully dressed and ran into the kitchen.

"Didn't Uncle Alton come back a-tall, Mum?"

"Morning, Babe. No, dear." Clissa was too quiet, smiling too much, Babe thought shrewdly. Wasn't happy.

"Where'd he go, Mum?"

"We don't know, Babe. Sit down and eat your breakfast."

"What's a misbegotten, Mum?" the Babe asked suddenly. Her mother nearly dropped the dish she was drying. "Babe! You must never say that agai !"

"Oh. Well, why is Uncle Alton, then?"

"Why is he what?"

Babe's mouth muscled around an outsize spoonful of oatmeal. "A misbe—"

"Babe!"

"All right, Mum," said Babe with her mouth full. "Well, why?"

"I told Cory not to shout last night," Clissa said half to herself.

"Well, whatever it means, he isn't," said Babe with finality. "Did he go hunting again?"

"He went to look for Kimbo, darling."

"Kimbo? Oh Mummy, is Kimbo gone, too? Didn't he come back either?"

"No dear. Oh, please, Babe, stop asking questions!"

"Al right. Where do you think they went?"

"Into the north woods. Be quiet."

Babe gulped away at her breakfast. An idea struck her; and as she thought of it she ate slower and slower, and cast more and more glances at her mother from under the lashes of her tilted eyes. It would be awful if daddy did anything to Uncle Alton. Someone ought to warn him.

Babe was halfway to the woods when Alton's .32-40 sent echoes giggling up and down the valley.

CORY was in the south thirty, riding a cultivator and cussing at the team of grays when he heard the gun. "Hoa," he called to the horses, and sat a moment to listen to the sound. "One-two-three. Four," he counted. "Saw someone,

blasted away at him. Had a chance to take aim and give him another, careful. My God!" He threw up the cultivator points and steered the team into the shade of three oaks. He hobbled the gelding with swift tosses of a spare strap, and headed for the woods. "Alton a killer," he murmured, and doubled back to the house for his gun. Clissa was standing just outside the door.

"Get shells!" he snapped and flung into the house. Clissa followed him. He was strapping his hunting knife on before she could get a box off the shelf. "Cory—"

"Hear that gun, did you? Alton's off his nut. He don't waste lead. He shot at someone just then, and he wasn't fixin' to shoot pa'tridges when I saw him last. He was out to get a man. Gimme my gun."

"Cory, Babe—"

"You keep her here. Oh, God, this is a helluva mess. I can't stand much more." Cory ran out the door.

Cissa caught his arm: "Cory, I'm trying to tell you. Babe isn't here. I've called, and she isn't here."

Cory's heavy, young-old face tautened. "Babe— Where did you last see her?"

"Breakfast." Clissa was crying now.

"She say where she was going?"

"No. She asked a lot of questions about Alton and where he'd gone."

"Did you say?"

Clissa's eyes widened, and she nodded, biting the back of her hand.

"You shouldn't ha' done that, Clissa," he gritted, and ran toward the woods. Clissa looking after him, and in that moment she could have killed herself.

Cory ran with his head up, straining with his legs and lungs and eyes at the long path. He puffed up the slope to the woods, agonized for breath after the forty-five minutes' heavy going. He couldn't even notice the damp smell of mold in the air.

He caught a movement in a thicket to his right, and dropped. Struggling to keep his breath, he crept forward until he could see clearly. There was something in there, all right. Something black, keeping still. Cory relaxed his legs and torso completely to make it easier for his heart to pump some strength back into them, and slowly raised the 12-gauge until it bore on the thing hidden in the thicket.

"Come out!" Cory said when he could speak.

Nothing happened.

"Come out or by God I'll shoot!" rasped Cory.

There was a long moment of silence, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"You asked for it," he said, and as he fired the thing leaped sideways into the open, screaming.

It was a thin little man dressed in sepulchral black, and bearing the rosiest little baby-face Cory had ever seen. The face was twisted with fright and pain. The little man scrambled to his feet and hopped up and down saying over and over, "Oh, my hand. Don't shoot again! Oh, my hand. Don't shoot again!" He stopped after a bit, when Cory had climbed to his feet, and he regarded the farmer out of sad china-blue eyes. "You shot me," he said reproachfully, holding up a little bloody hand. "Oh, my goodness."

Cory said, "Now, who the hell are you?"

The man immediately became hysterical, mouthing such a flood

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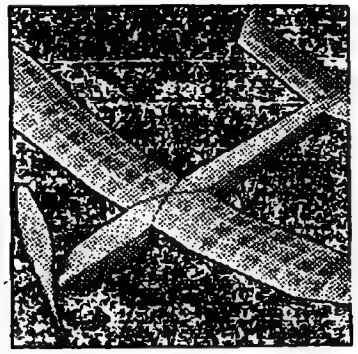

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of broken sentences that Cory stepped back a pace and half-raised his gun in self-defense. It seemed to consist mostly of "I lost my papers," and "I didn't do it," and "It was horrible. Horrible. Horrible," and "The dead man," and Oh, don't shoot again."

Cory tried twice to ask him a question, and then he stepped over and knocked the man down. He lay on the ground writhing and moaning and blubbering and putting his bloody hand to his mouth where Cory had hit him.

"Now what's going on around here?"

The man rolled over and sat up. "I didn't do it!" he sobbed. "I didn't! I was walking along and I heard the gun and I heard some swearing and an awful scream and I went over there and peeped and I saw the dead man and I ran away and you came and I hid and you shot me and—"

"*Shut up!*" The man did, as if a switch had been thrown. "Now," said Cory, pointing along the path, "you say there's a dead man up there?"

The man nodded and began crying in earnest. Cory helped him up. "Follow this path back to my farmhouse," he said. "Tell my wife to fix up your hand. *Don't* tell her anything else. And wait there until I come. Hear?"

"Yes. Thank you. Oh, thank you. *Snff.*"

"Go on now." Cory gave him a gentle shove in the right direction and went alone, in cold fear, up the path to the spot where he had found Alton the night before.

He found him here now, too, and Kimbo. Kimbo and Alton had spent several years together in the deepest friendship; they had hunted and fought and slept together, and the lives they owed each other were

finished now. They were dead together.

It was terrible that they died the same way. Cory Drew was a strong man, but he gasped and fainted dead away when he saw what the thing of the mold had done to his brother and his brother's dog.

THE LITTLE MAN in black hurried down the path, whimpering and holding his injured hand as if he rather wished he could limp with it. After a while the whimper faded away, and the hurried stride changed to a walk as the gibbering terror of the last hour receded. He drew two deep breaths, said: "My goodness!" and felt almost normal. He bound a linen handkerchief around his wrist, but the hand kept bleeding. He tried the elbow, and that made it hurt. So he stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket and simply waved the hand stupidly in the air until the blood clotted.

It wasn't much of a wound. Two of the balls of shot had struck him, one passing through the fleshy part of his thumb and the other scoring the side. As he thought of it, he became a little proud that he had borne a gunshot wound. He strolled along in the midmorning sunlight, feeling a dreamy communion with the boys at the front. "The whine of shot and shell—" Where had he read that? Ah, what a story this would make. "And there beside the"—what was the line?—"the embattled farmer stood." Didn't the awfulest things happen in the nicest places? This was a nice forest. No screeches and snakes and deep dark menaces. Not a storybook wood at all. Shot by a gun. How exciting! He was now—he strutted—a gentleman adventurer. He did not see the great moist horror that clumped along behind him, though his nostrils crinkled a little with its foulness.

The monster had three little holes close together on its chest, and one little hole in the middle of its slimy forehead. It had three close-set pits in its back and one on the back of its head. These marks were where Alton Drew's bullets had struck and passed through. Half of the monster's shapeless face was sloughed away, and there was a deep indentation on its shoulder. This was what Alton Drew's gun butt had done after he clubbed it and struck at the thing that would not lie down after he put his four bullets through it. When these things happened the monster was not hurt or angry. It only wondered why Alton Drew acted that way. Now it followed the little man without hurrying at all, matching his stride step by step and dropping little particles of muck behind it.

The little man went on out of the wood and stood with his back against a big tree at the forest's edge, and he thought. Enough had happened to him here. What good would it do to stay and face a horrible murder inquest, just to continue this silly, vague quest? There was supposed to be the ruin of an old, old hunting lodge deep in this wood somewhere, and perhaps it would hold the evidence he wanted. But it was a vague report—vague enough to be forgotten without regret. It would be the height of foolishness to stay for all the hick-town red tape that would follow that ghastly affair back in the wood. Ergo, it would be ridiculous to follow that farmer's advice, to go to his house and wait for him. He would go back to town.

The monster was leaning against the other side of the big tree.

The little man snuffled disgustedly

at a sudden overpowering odor of rot. He reached for his handkerchief, fumbled and dropped it. As he bent to pick it up, the monster's arm *whuffed* heavily in the air where his head had been—a blow that would certainly have removed that baby-faced protuberance. The man stood up and would have put the handkerchief to his nose had it not been so bloody. The creature behind the tree lifted its arm agai just as the little man tossed the handkerchief away and stepped out into the field, heading across country to the distant highway that would take him back to town. The monster pounced on the handkerchief, picked it up, studied it, tore it across several times and inspected the tattered edges. Then it gazed vacantly at the disappearing figure of the little man, and finding him no longer interesting, turned back into the woods.

Babe broke into a trot at the sound of the shots. It was important to warn Uncle Alton about what her father had said, but it was more interesting to find out what he had bagged. Oh, he'd bagged it, all right. Uncle Alton never fired without killing. This was about the first time she had ever heard him blast away like that. Must be a bear, she thought excitedly, tripping over a root, sprawling, rolling to her feet again, without noticing the tumble. She'd love to have another bearskin in her room. Where would she put it? Maybe they could line it and she could have it for a blanket. Uncle Alton could sit on it and read to her in the evening— Oh, no. No. Not with this trouble between him and dad. Oh, if she could only do something! She tried to run faster, worried and anticipating, but she was out of breath and went more slowly instead.

At the top of the rise by the edge of the woods she stopped and looked back. Far down in the valley lay the south thirty. She scanned it carefully, looking for her father. The new furrows and the old were sharply defined, and her keen eyes saw immediately that Cory had left the line with the cultivator and had angled the team over to the shade trees without finishing his row. That wasn't like him. She could see the team now, and Cory's pale-blue denim was not in sight.

A little nearer was the house; and as her gaze fell on it she moved out of the cleared pathway. Her father was coming; she had seen his shotgun and he was running. He could really cover ground when he wanted to. He must be chasing her, she thought immediately. He'd guessed that she would run toward the sound of the shots, and he was going to follow her tracks to Uncle Alton and shoot him. She knew that he was as good a woodsman as Alton; he would most certainly see her tracks. Well, she'd fix him.

She ran along the edge of the wood, being careful to dig her heels deeply into the loam. A hundred yards of this, and she angled into the forest and ran until she reached a particularly thick grove of trees. Shinnying up like a squirrel, she squirmed from one close-set tree to another until she could go no farther back toward the path, then dropped lightly to the ground and crept on her way, now stepping very gently. It would take him an hour to beat around for her trail, she thought proudly, and by that time she could easily get to Uncle Alton. She giggled to herself as she thought of the way she had fooled her father. And the little sound of laughter drowned

The little man didn't see It reach out—but he started walking just then and the bludgeoning fist missed—.

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out, for her, the sound of Alton's hoarse dying scream.

She reached and crossed the path and slid through the brush beside it. The shots came from up around here somewhere. She stopped and listened several times, and then suddenly heard something coming toward her, fast. She ducked under cover, terrified, and a little baby-faced man in black, his blue eyes wide with horror, crashed blindly past her, the leather case he carried catching on the branches. It spun a moment and then fell right in front of her. The man never missed it.

Babe lay there for a long moment and then picked up the case and faded into the woods. Things were happening too fast for her. She wanted Uncle Alton, but she dared not call. She stopped again and strained her ears. Back toward the edge of the wood she heard her father's voice, and another's—probably the man who had dropped the brief case. She dared not go over there. Filled with enjoyable terror, she thought hard, then snapped her fingers in triumph. She and Alton had played Injun many times up here; they had a whole repertoire of secret signals. She had practiced birdcalls until she knew them better than the birds themselves. What would it be? Ah—blue jay. She threw back her head and by some youthful alchemy produced a nerve-shattering screech that would have done justice to any jay that ever flew. She repeated it, and then twice more.

The response was immediate—the call of a blue jay, four times, spaced two and two. Babe nodded to herself happily. That was the signal that they were to meet immediately at The Place. The Place was a hide-out that he had discovered and shared with her, and not another soul knew of it; an

angle of rock beside a stream not far away. It wasn't exactly a cave, but almost. Enough so to be entrancing. Babe trotted happily away toward the brook. She had just known that Uncle Alton would remember the call of the blue jay, and what it meant.

In the tree that arched over Alton's scattered body perched a large jay bird, preening itself and shining in the sun. Quite unconscious of the presence of death, hardly noticing the Babe's realistic cry, it screamed again four times, two and two.

IT TOOK CORY more than a moment to recover himself from what he had seen. He turned away from it and leaned weakly against a pine, panting. Alton. That was Alton lying there, in—parts.

"God! God, God, God—"

Gradually his strength returned, and he forced himself to turn again. Stepping carefully, he bent and picked up the .32-40. Its barrel was bright and clean, but the butt and stock were smeared with some kind of stinking rottenness. Where had he seen the stuff before? Somewhere—no matter. He cleaned it off absently, throwing the befouled bandanna away afterward. Through his mind ran Alton's words—was that only last night?—"*I'm goin' to start trackin'. An' I'm goin' to keep trackin' till I find the one done this job on Kimbo.*"

Cory searched shrinkingly until he found Alton's box of shells. The box was wet and sticky. That made it—better, somehow. A bullet wet with Alton's blood was the right thing to use. He went away a short distance, circled around till he found heavy footprints, then came back.

"I'm a-trackin' for you, bud," he whispered thickly, and began. Through the brush he followed its wavering spoor, amazed at the amount of filthy mold about, gradually associating it with the thing that had killed his brother. There was nothing in the world for him any more but hate and doggedness. Cursing himself for not getting Alton home last night, he followed the tracks to the edge of the woods. They led him to a big tree there, and there he saw something else—the footprints of the little city man. Nearby lay some tattered scraps of linen, and—what was that?

Another set of prints—small ones. Small, stub-toed ones. Babe's.

"Babe!" Cory screamed. "Babe!"

No answer. The wind sighed. Somewhere a blue jay called.

BABE STOPPED and turned when she heard her father's voice, faint with distance, piercing.

"Listen at him holler," she crooned delightedly. "Gee, he sounds mad." She sent a jay bird's call disrespectfully back to him and hurried to The Place.

It consisted of a mammoth boulder beside the brook. Some upheaval in the glacial age had cleft it, cutting out a huge V-shaped chunk. The widest part of the cleft was at the water's edge, and the narrowest was hidden by bushes. It made a little ceilingless room, rough and uneven and full of potholes and cavelets inside, and yet with quite a level floor. The open end was at the water's edge.

Babe parted the bushes and peered down the cleft.

"Uncle Alton!" she called softly. There was no answer. Oh, well, he'd be along. She scrambled in and slid down to the floor.

She loved it here. It was shaded and cool, and the chattering little

stream filled it with shifting golden lights and laughing gurgles. She called again, on principle, and then perched on an outcropping to wait. It was only then she realized that she still carried the little man's brief case.

She turned it over a couple of times and then opened it. It was divided in the middle by a leather wall. On one side were a few papers in a large yellow envelope, and on the other some sandwiches, a candy bar, and an apple. With a youngster's complacent acceptance of manna from heaven, Babe fell to. She saved one sandwich for Alton, mainly because she didn't like its highly spiced bologna. The rest made quite a feast.

She was a little worried when Alton hadn't arrived, even after she had consumed the apple core. She got up and tried to skim some flat pebbles across the roiling brook, and she stood on her hands, and she tried to think of a story to tell herself, and she tried just waiting. Finally, in desperation, she turned again to the brief case, took out the papers, curled up by the rocky wall and began to read them. It was something to do, anyway.

There was an old newspaper clipping that told about strange wills that people had left. An old lady had once left a lot of money to whoever would make the trip from the Earth to the Moon and back. Another had financed a home for cats whose masters and mistresses had died. A man left thousands of dollars to the first man who could solve a certain mathematical problem and prove his solution. But one item was blue-penciled. It was

One of the strangest of wills still in force is that of Thaddeus M. Kirk, who died in 1920. It appears that he built an elaborate mausoleum with burial vaults for all the remains of his family. He collected and removed caskets from all over the country to fill the designated niches. Kirk was the last of his line; there were no relatives when he died. His will stated that the mausoleum was to be kept in repair permanently, and that a certain sum was to be set aside as a reward for whoever could produce the body of his grandfather, Roger Kirk, whose niche is still empty. Anyone finding this body is eligible to receive a substantial fortune.

Babe yawned vaguely over this, but kept on reading because there was nothing else to do. Next was a thick sheet of business correspondence, bearing the letterhead of a firm of lawyers. The body of it ran:

In regard to your query regarding the will of Thaddeus Kirk, we are authorized to state that his grandfather was a man about five feet, five inches, whose left arm had been broken and who had a triangular silver plate set into his skull. There is no information as to the whereabouts of his death. He disappeared and was declared legally dead after the lapse of fourteen years.

The amount of the reward as stated in the will, plus accrued interest, now amounts to a fraction over sixty-two thousand dollars. This will be paid to anyone who produces the remains, providing that said remains answer descriptions kept in our private files.

There was more, but Babe was bored. She went on to the little black notebook. There was nothing in it but penciled and highly abbreviated records of visits to libraries; quotations rfom books with title like "History of Angelina and Tyler Counties" and "Kirk Family History." Babe threw that aside, too. Where could Uncle Alton be?

She began to sing tunelessly, "Tumalumalum tum, ta ta ta," pretending to dance a minuet with flowing skirts like a girl she had seen in the movies. A rustle of the bushes at the entrance to The Place stopped her. She peeped upward,

saw them being thrust aside. Quickly she ran to a tiny cul-de-sac in the rock wall, just big enough for her to hide in. She giggled at the thought of how surprised Uncle Alton would be when she jumped out at him.

She heard the newcomer come shuffling down the steep slope of the crevice and land heavily on the floor. There was something about the sound— What was it? It occurred to her that though it was a hard job for a big man like Uncle Alton to get through the little opening in the bushes, she could hear no heavy breathing. She heard no breathing at all!

BABE PEEPED OUT into the main cave and squealed in utmost horror. Standing there was, not Uncle Alton, but a massive caricature of a man: a huge thing like an irregular mud doll, clumsily made. It quivered and parts of it glistened and parts of it were dried and crumby. Half of the lower left part of its face was gone, giving it a lopsided look. It had no perceptible mouth or nose, and its eyes were crooked, one higher than the other, both a dingy brown with no whites at all. It stood quite still looking at her, its only movement a steady unalive quivering of its body.

It wondered about the queer little noise Babe had made.

Babe crept far back against a little pocket of stone, her brain running round and round in tiny circles of agony. She opened her mouth to cry out, and could not. Her eyes bulged and her face flamed with the strangling effort, and the two golden ropes of her braided hair twitched and twitched as she hunted hopelessly for a way out. If only she were out in the open—or in the wedge-shaped half-cave where the thing was—or home in bed!

The thing clumped toward her, expressionless, moving with a slow inevitability that was the sheer crux of horror. Babe lay wide-eyed and frozen, mounting pressure of terror stilling her lungs, making her heart shake the whole world. The monster came to the mouth of the little pocket, tried to walk to her and was stopped by the sides. It was such a narrow little fissure; and it was all Babe could do to get in. The thing from the wood stood straining against the rock at its shoulders, pressing harder and harder to get to Babe. She sat up slowly, so near to the thing that its odor was almost thick enough to see, and a wild hope burst through her voiceless fear. It couldn't get in! It couldn't get in because it was too big!

The substance of its feet spread slowly under the tremendous strain, and at its shoulder appeared a slight crack. It widened as the monster unfeelingly crushed itself against the rock, and suddenly a large piece of the shoulder came away and the being twisted slushily three feet farther in. It lay quietly with its muddy eyes fixed on her, and then brought one thick arm up over its head and reached.

Babe scrambled in the inch farther she had believed impossible, and the filthy clubbed hand stroked down her back, leaving a trail of muck on the blue denim of the shirt she wore. The monster surged suddenly and, lying full length now, gained that last precious inch. A black hand seized one of her braids, and for Babe the lights went out.

When she came to, she was dangling by her hair from that same crusted paw. The thing held her high, so that her face and its featureless head were not more than a foot apart. It gazed at her with a

mild curiosity in its eyes, and it swung her slowly back and forth. The agony of her pulled hair did what fear could not do—gave her a voice. She screamed. She opened her mouth and puffed up her powerful young lungs, and she sounded off. She held her throat in the position of the first scream, and her chest labored and pumped more air through the frozen throat. Shrill and monotonous and infinitely piercing, her screams.

The thing did not mind. It held her as she was, and watched. When it had learned all it could from this phenomenon, it dropped her jarringly, and looked around the half-cave, ignoring the stunned and huddled Babe. It reached over and picked up the leather brief case and tore it twice across as if it were tissue. It saw the sandwich Babe had left, picked it up, crushed it, dropped it.

Babe opened her eyes, saw that she was free, and just as the thing turned back to her she dove between its legs and out into the shallow pool in front of the rock, paddled across and hit the other bank screaming. A vicious little light of fury burned in her; she picked up a grapefruit-sized stone and hurled it with all her frenzied might. It flew low and fast, and struck squashily on the monster's ankle. The thing was just taking a step toward the water; the stone caught it off balance, and its unpracticed equilibrium could not save it. It tottered for a long, silent moment at the edge and then splashed into the stream. Without a second look Babe ran shrieking away.

Cory Drew was following the little gobs of mold that somehow indicated the path of the murderer, and he was nearby when he first heard her scream. He broke into a run, dropping his shotgun and holding the .32-40 ready to fire. He ran with such deadly panic in his heart that he ran right past the huge cleft rock and was a hundred yards past it before she burst out through the pool and ran up the bank. He had to run hard and fast to catch her, because anything behind her was that faceless horror in the cave, and she was living for the one idea of getting away from there. He caught her in his arms and swung her to him, and she screamed on and on and on.

Babe didn't see Cory at all, even when he held her and quieted her.

THE MONSTER lay in the water. It neither liked nor disliked this new element. It rested on the bottom, its massive head a foot beneath the surface, and it curiously considered the facts that it had garnered. There was the little humming noise of Babe's voice that sent the monster questing into the cave. There was the black material of the brief case that resisted so much more than green things when he tore it. There was the little two-legged one who sang and brought him near, and who screamed when he came. There was this new cold moving thing he had fallen into. It was washing his body away. That had never happened before. That was interesting. The monster decided to stay and observe this new thing. It felt no urge to save itself; it could only be curious.

The brook came laughing down out of its spring, ran down from its source beckoning to the sunbeams and embracing freshets and helpful brooklets. It shouted and played with streaming little roots, and nudged the minnows and pollywogs about in its tiny backwaters. It was a happy brook. When it came to the pool by the cloven rock it

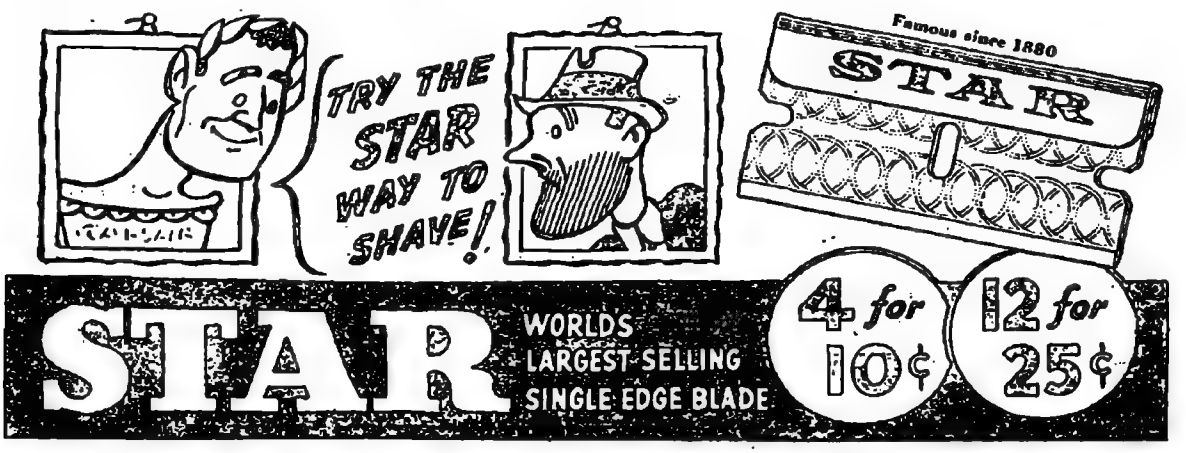
found the monster there, and plucked at it. It soaked the foul substances and smoothed and melted the molds, and the waters below the thing eddied darkly with its diluted matter. It was a thorough brook. It washed all it touched, persistently. Where it found filth, it removed filth; and if there were layer on layer of foulness, then layer by foul layer it was removed. It was a good brook. It did not mind the poison of the monster, but took it up and thinned it and spread it in little rings round rocks downstream, and let it drift to the rootlets of water plants, that they might grow greener and lovelier. And the monster melted.

"I am smaller," the thing thought. "That is interesting. I could not move now. And now this part of me which thinks is going, too. It will stop in just a moment, and drift away with the rest of the body. It will stop thinking and I will stop being, and that, too, is a very interesting thing."

So the monster melted and dirtied the water, and the water was clean again, washing and washing the skeleton that the monster had left. It was not very big, and there was a badly-healed knot on the left arm. The sunlight flickered on the triangular silver plate set into the pale skull, and the skeleton was very clean now. The brook laughed about it for an age.

THEY FOUND the skeleton, six grim-lipped men who came to find a killer. No one had believed Babe, when she told her story days later. It had to be days later because Babe had screamed for seven hours without stopping, and had lain like a dead child for a day. No one believed her at all, because her story was all about the bad fella, and they knew that the bad fella was simply a thing that her father had made up to frighten her with. But it was through her that the skeleton was found, and so the men at the bank sent a check to the Drews for more money than they had ever dreamed about. It was old Roger Kirk, sure enough, that skeleton, though it was found five miles from where he had died and sank into the forest floor where the hot molds builded around his skeleton and emerged—a monster.

So the Drews had a new barn and fine new livestock and they hired four men. But they didn't have Alton. And they didn't have Kimbo. And Babe screams at night and has grown very thin.



ALL ROADS

by MONA FARNSWORTH

Rome was a pleasant little village—and curious in many ways. For instance, it was unique in this: roads led to it—

THE minute Johnnie the torn-up road ahead, he knew what it meant. A detour. And detours meant trouble and a waste of valuable time.

But there was no help for it. The highway was obviously impassable from this point on. Great heaps of yellow sand dammed its mouth and, just beyond, a derrick lifted skeleton fingers against the crisp, clear sky of morning. Near at hand some workmen in a ditch maneuvered desultory shovels.

"Hi, brother." Johnnie leaned out the window of his sedan and hailed the nearest laborer. "Where do we go from here?"

The man jabbed his shovel into a heap of the soft sand and ambled over. He spat neatly and smiled a friendly smile. "Wh'ju say?" he queried conversationally.

"I just want to know," said Johnnie, "where I go from here. There's no road and no signs. You can't detour, you know," he explained kindly, "without something to detour on."

The man grinned. "You've got something there," he agreed heartily. "You've sure got something there." And he said nothing more.

Johnnie felt the flea of impatience hopping on the griddle of his rising annoyance. "Listen," he yapped, "I haven't any time to waste playing games, no matter how much fun they are. I've got to be in Bough City by noon. And if I can't get through on this road—where do I go?"

The man took off his battered hat and scratched his head. "I dunno," he said finally. "I'm a stranger here myself."

Johnnie's annoyance whipped through vexation and exploded in anger. "Listen, you—" he began just as the foreman of the gang crossed the road.

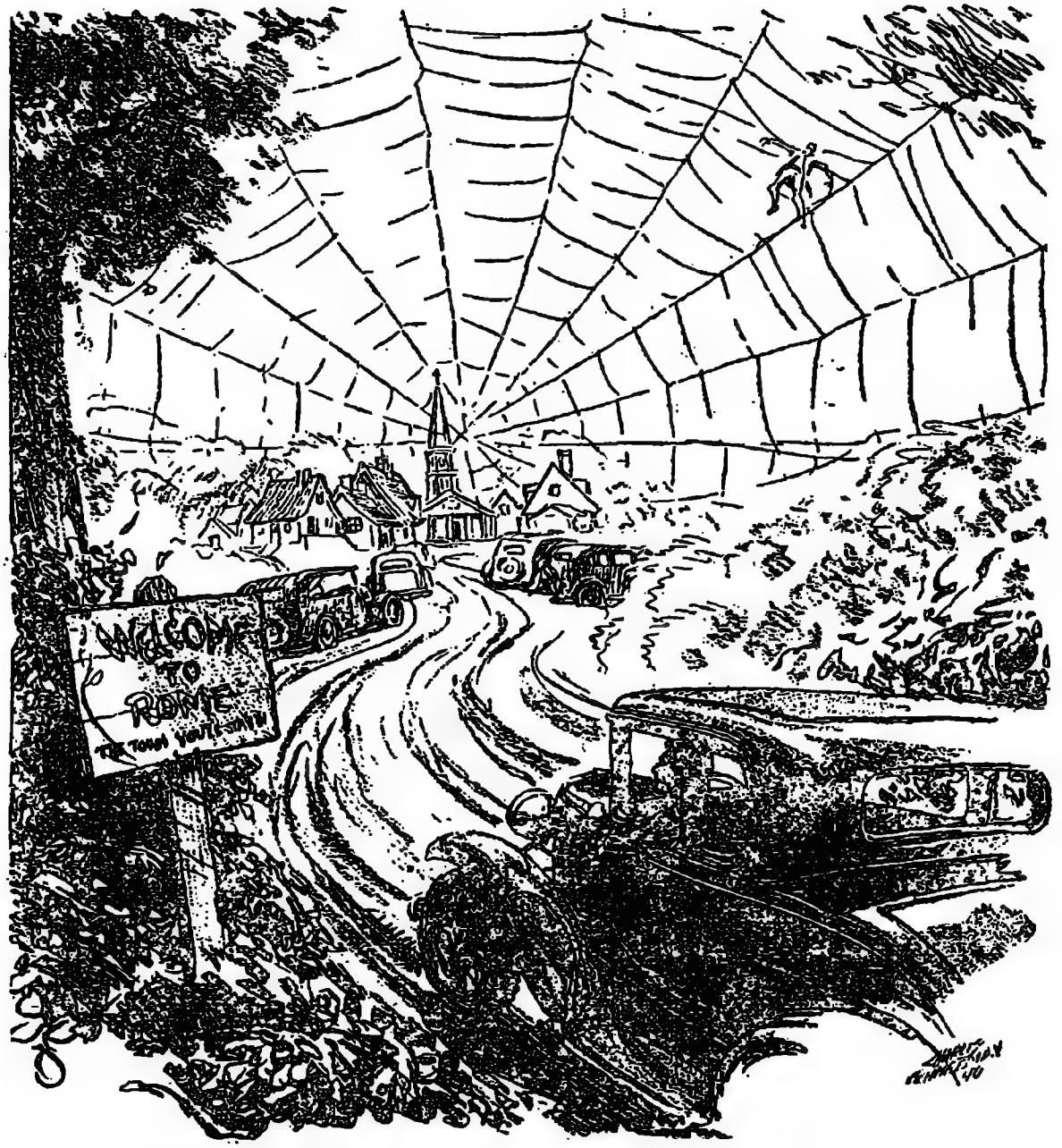
"Don't get hot," the foreman admonished amiably. "He's telling you the truth. We're all strangers here—we're a new gang they sent up this morning. The old gang made a mess of things. They got everything twisted. That's why this construction begins in the middle of nowhere instead of at a crossroads where there'd be a detour. We've got to push it up as fast as we can till we reach the other road. Then everything'll be all right."

"Fine," said Johnnie. "And how long will that take?"

"About two weeks."

"And in the meantime I'm supposed to sit— Say, listen!" yelled Johnnie. "I want to get out of here! Out! Understand? I've got to be in Bough City—"

"All right, all right," said the fore-



man soothingly. "Keep your shirt on and you'll get there. I was just going to tell you that if you'll turn that jellopy of yours around and go back on the road a piece you'll find a detour. It's on the right the way you're headed now. And don't throw a fit when you see it. It's an old wood road—but if you stick on, it'll bring you back on the highway lower down."

"Thanks," said Johnnie grudgingly.

The man waved his hand. "Good luck," he said.

JOHNNIE FOUND the road without any trouble. It was sure a wood road, all right. So nearly invisible with its overhanging trees and grass-grown ruts that if Johnnie hadn't been hunting for it, and warned

about the sort of road it was, he'd never have found it, much less ventured upon it. But as it was he turned in with no hesitation and only a feeling of relief that he was on his way again.

It was not till a good deal later that he realized the mistake he'd made. The foreman had told him, "on the right the way you're headed." The road Johnnie took was on his right sure enough—but in the meantime he'd turned his car. But by the time Johnnie got around to figuring this out it was too late to do anything about it. The die—if you could call it that—was cast.

Johnnie drove on and on. The road was a meandering affair that must, at one time, have been a cow path, and that, even now, was little more. It wavered and wandered, lurching around boulders and disposing itself hesitantly in graceful, though meaningless, curves. Johnnie, over and over again, was on the verge of turning back—but two things dissuaded him. First, the road was too narrow and thickly tree-lined to turn in, and second, there was nothing to go back to. He'd have to bump back all these miles he'd already bumped, and when he got to the highway, what would he have? Nothing but heaps of yellow sand and that crazy know-nothing construction gang. No, his good sense told him to keep on. Eventually he'd get there.

And eventually he did. Though not to Bough City as he had hoped. The place he landed in was called Rome; a straggling, sleepy, utterly contented little town that nestled warmly in a fold of summer-green hills. Johnnie knew the name of it was Rome because, while he was still struggling with the ruts of the lane, he had come upon the sign. Moss-grown, it was, and rusty at the nail heads, but it still stuck bravely to the bare post it had been hammered to, and it still flaunted its eager invitation:

WELCOME TO
ROME
THE TOWN YOU'LL STAY IN

"Well!" Johnnie couldn't help grinning at it. "Cocky, aren't they?" But he was glad to be there, just the same. It was well past noon and his stomach, teased by the memory of a very early breakfast, knew it. "I hope this paragon of a town can produce a hamburger," muttered Johnnie hopefully. His eye went ahead on the road, pushing through the green tunnel of trees, searching for a house, a wisp of smoke, anything that would give promise of human habitation.

And that was how he happened to see the straggle of abandoned cars that, all of a sudden, seemed to become part of the landscape. All kinds of cars they were; all sizes, vintages and conditions. There was one so old that it was practically buried in a fragrant tangle of wild honeysuckle—and there was one that was newer than the three-year-old job Johnnie was driving. It was also the same make. "Now, why would they junk that?" thought Johnnie, puzzled. "These busses are good on the road as long as they'll stick together." And then he thought, "I'll bet *I* could fix it!"

That thought brought him in sight of the first house—a cozy little clapboard affair covered with climbing roses. Then other houses followed it, and the first thing he knew he'd gotten right in the middle of town where a square market green was hemmed in by bending elms, and a quiet white church directed its steeple at the curving sky.

But Johnnie had no time to waste on local loveliness. His eye was caught, and held, by the far more interesting display, in a small, nearby window, of a plate which held a most temptingly browned lamb chop, a nice heap of hashed brown potatoes, a few gracefully disposed slices of tomato and a heap of emerald-green spinach. Beside these delicacies there reposed, on a small, gay little plate, a slab of custard pie that set Johnnie's helpless mouth to a succulent watering.

"Gee whiz," thought Johnnie gratefully, "I ask for a hamburger and I get—this!" For without doubt the feast set in the window could be his for the exchange over the counter of a proper sum. The place was obviously, in its own quiet way, a restaurant. He grinned and shoved open the door.

For a minute Johnnie thought the tidy sun-filled room was empty, and it gave him time to look around. Flowers in the windows, vines trailing from a shelf, a wide fireplace made of field stone, and the cozy intimacy of small tables bright with little nosegays that nodded in diminutive pottery jugs. And over all this, like a pattern woven in the sunlight, was the delicious incense of good food being cooked in a masterful manner.

"M-m-m," sighed Johnnie, and he felt contentment flowing over him in a warm tide.

It was then he saw the bright blue eyes that were watching him, sizing him up, from the shadowed corner behind the fireplace.

"Oh," said Johnnie. "Er how do you do?"

"Greetings," said a cheery voice. Then a chair came down on its four legs, and the man rose and came forward. He was a happy-looking old codger, his waist-length beard gleaming like silver and his eyes, under the white eaves of his brows, twinkling like a mischievous baby's.

"Welcome, son." There was a sort of chuckle that ran delightedly under his words. "It's always a great day for Rome when a stranger shows up. Hope you like it here!"

"It seems like a nice town," Johnnie said politely. "I'm just passing through."

"Sho!" twinkled the old man. "Well, I swan." His eyes danced into Johnnie's like twin elves. "Where you going, son?"

"Bough City," said Johnnie. "I had to take this detour because the main road was torn up."

"It was, eh?" The old man seemed to appreciate this bit of news, rolling it around on his tongue. "I'll have to tell mamma," he said. "Mamma is the one who really runs this place," he added by way of explanation.

"I see." Johnnie grinned. "So now this road is being used for a detour it'll mean more business?"

"Eh?" The old man cocked an eyebrow. "More business? Oh, sure—sure." He chuckled happily. "More business for mamma. I'll have to tell her." He turned away, but before he could reach the door, it opened and a bright little apple-cheeked woman stepped in. She was buxom and sweet, with a huge apron enveloping her and shining white curls bouncing to frame her snapping black eyes.

She twinkled at Johnnie like a delighted child. "A stranger!" Her tiny plump hands patted together in soft applause. "A real stranger! And you, Chadwick," she scolded her husband gently, "fie for not having him to sit and eat! What a man!" She shook her head at him so that the curls, dropping on either

side of her pink cheeks, danced merrily.

Then she flew at Johnnie like a bustling bird. She urged him into a chair, whisked invisible dust off the shining table and chattered: "Lamb chops? You like lamb chops? Though we have some cold ham, if you prefer. And do you know what? There's hot biscuits. Never did I see a man yet who didn't like my hot biscuits. With fresh melted butter."

"I'm hungry," said Johnnie, as if that answered everything.

She bustled off and the man came puttering around with an earthenware jug from which he poured sparkling water into a squat glass goblet. Johnnie drank thirstily. The water was sweet and clear and cold as stone. But it was the goblet that caught his eye. Curious, he held it up to the light. A pale watery green in color, it was bubbled and imperfect with the lovely imperfection of ancient handmade things. Unless Johnnie missed his guess the goblet in his hand was a collector's item. He mentioned this to the old man.

"Sho!" said the old one, delighted. "Samuel would like to hear that, Samuel would. He makes all our glass. Got a good glass works over in the Hollow. Samuel's great-grandpappy built it, they say. I'll tell Samuel what you say—and he'll make you some. Be glad to."

"That's very kind of you"—Johnnie smiled politely—"but probably not possible. You see, I shan't be very likely to come this way again on—"

"I'll tell Samuel to start right away," nodded the old man as if Johnnie hadn't spoken. "By the way, son," he changed the subject abruptly, "what do you do for a living? There's some kinds of folks we need in this town right bad. Now, if you were a good horse doctor or maybe a preacher—"

Johnnie couldn't help laughing. The old codger was so earnest. "No," he had to tell him, "I'm neither one—and anyway"—he had to be polite about it, because the old blue eyes were looking so gravely into his—"I'm really not staying here at all. I'm just passing through."

"Sho!" A twinkle shot across the old man's face. "You said that once, didn't you son? But I'm an old man—and I guess I get ideas. It would be sure nice if you would stay and live with us, though," he ended wistfully. "It's a right nice little town. You'd like it here."

"I'm sure I would." Johnnie was getting tired of this—and where were those darn lamb chops, anyway?

THE DOOR was kicked briskly open and, suddenly, the lamb chops were present, accompanied by all their fixings. The little old lady set the big flat plate down in front of him with a delighted flourish.

"Set to," she invited cheerily. "Eat."

Johnnie ate, while the two old folks pulled up chairs and watched him happily. But when at last, filled to surfeit, he offered to pay them, they laughed at him like children.

"Money!" chuckled the old man. "What would we do with it? We have no use for money in this town."

"No use for—" Johnnie goggled. "What do you buy things with? What"—his eye fell on the wonderful goblet—"what did you buy that with?"

"That?" The old man turned to his wife. "What did we give Samuel for that, mamma? Was it a goat? Or did we just keep him supplied

with fresh eggs for a month? I can't remember."

"Oh," said Johnnie, understanding, "barter. Well"—he grinned suddenly—"I've got something I can barter for this meal! You come on out to my car—both of you." He led them out, lugged a salesman's big sample case out of the back of the sedan and flung it open on the grass. "Help yourself," he invited largely, waving his hand toward the glittering display. "I never saw a lady yet who couldn't use trick gadgets for her kitchen. Look, here's a new kind of cake beater—and this thing's a new invention for chopping vegetables—and here—" But the little old lady had fallen upon the bag with squeals of joy, like a child in a toy store.

"Well, I swan," said her elderly husband. "So that's your business—selling them things?"

"Yes—and no," said Johnnie. "By trade I'm a machinist—but I lost my last job when the factory I worked in failed, and I'm sort of doing this temporarily till I get set again."

But the old man seemed hardly to be listening. His face was alight, as is the face of one who witnesses a miracle. "Mamma!" he chortled. "Did you hear what the boy said? A machinist! He's a machinist! And only the other day William the Younger was telling me the trouble he is having with his looms. They need repair and there is, since Nathaniel's death, no one in town who has the knack. But with a machinist— Ah, son, you are a veritable answer to prayer."

The little old lady raised glowing eyes from the sample case. Together they gazed upon Johnnie as if, truly, he had dropped from the clouds.

"Mark, the potter, is having trouble, too," she whispered. "The fingers of the blacksmith, though well-meaning, break more than they mend when they fumble with his wheels. But—a machinist! And," she added eagerly, "he can live in the house Jonathan built on the hilltop. It is a sweet house—with seven windows. And I will make the curtains with my own hands! I will make your curtains," she chuckled, "and in return you will give me this cake mixer! Oh, Chadwick"—she twitched her husband's sleeve—"the wonderful things there are in this bag! You cannot dream. The young man could live here six years, or seven, just on the contents of this bag alone! He would not need to work."

"Not need to work!" The oldster stared in horror, as if his wife had uttered some kind of blasphemy. "Patience, you know well *everyone* works. There is no happiness without industry."

"Yes, yes, I know," chirruped the elderly Patience soothingly. "But—Oh, Chadwick, the contents of this bag are so wonderful! The young man will be able to get anything in this town he might want. *Anything!* Though, of course," she added quickly, "he will work as machinist—we need him so badly."

She twinkled up at Johnnie—and he twinkled back at her amiably. He couldn't help it. There was something about her smile that was like a warm drink flowing through him—and for two cents he'd have kissed her on her round red-apple cheek and told her how he felt about her. But he couldn't waste any more time. It was past one o'clock and he had to get going. The business of the world must move forward, and he'd better get himself and his sample cases on to Bough City. He

snapped the big bag shut and heaved it into the car.

The old man pulled at his beard thoughtfully. "You really going then, son?"

"I've got to," said Johnny, "though," he added politely, "it's very kind of you to want me to stay."

"Sho," said the old man. "It's a kindness we're doing ourselves. Well"—he teetered back and forth on his heels, and his fingers still stroked the length of his silver beard —"if you feel you have to go," he said gently, "of course you have to, but"—the blue eyes twinkled into Johnnie's—"don't forget to drop in and see us when you come back this way."

"I won't," replied Johnnie. "Thanks."

The old lady smiled. "I'll bake you a cake," she promised. "A big one. Chocolate. Do you like chocolate?"

"Very much," said Johnnie. He was getting a little tired of this foolishness now. And besides he wanted to be on his way. He climbed into his car and pressed the starter. The motor hummed. "Good-by." He remembered his manners and leaned toward the two old people, standing there, hand in hand, smiling at him with their quick, bright eyes. "Good-by, and thanks for the luncheon!" Then he thought of something else. "Which road do I take?" he called. "Which is the detour?"

The old man answered something. Johnnie saw him jerk his thumb to the right and heard his voice. But the words were blurred by the humming of the motor. So, when Johnnie got to the other side of the sweet, neat little town and saw the two roads branching out, he couldn't be sure. And there was no one around, then, to ask. So Johnnie, remembering the jerk of the old man's thumb, took the road to the right.

It was a pretty road, and had that same air of wandering uncertainty that Johnnie had noticed about the road that had brought him to Rome. It went on and on, twisting here and there, circling a pool fringed by silver birches, and humping over a small bridge that jumped a brook. It was, thought Johnnie, one of the prettiest roads he'd ever been on. Blossoming fruit trees blew small gusts of fragrance in the warm air, and wild flowers carpeted a pattern in the grass.

And the road wound on and on—just going and not seeming to get anywhere. Till, just about the time Johnnie was beginning to wonder what was what, he saw a straggle of houses through the trees and smelled, clearly, the sharp, sweet odor of wood smoke. Good! A town. He'd stop and find out just where he was. He pulled up at the side of the road —but he didn't get out of the car. He didn't need to. Because the quiet little town, smiling at him from its nest of green trees, was, without the shadow of a doubt, the same little town he had left an hour and a half before. The little town of Rome.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" said Johnnie. But, of course, he knew instantly what had happened. He'd mistaken the direction the old man had given him and he'd taken the wrong road. Somehow or other he'd just circled around and come back.

Johnnie backed his car around. He could see, now, the road he should have taken. It was, or seemed to be, a little better traveled than the road he'd been on, so, of course, it was the one he should have taken.

It was better traveled. In spots it was almost good. Johnnie was

able to make pretty good time and he felt fine about it. Now he was getting somewhere. He began to whistle a jumpy, gay little tune through his teeth—a tune that faded to a shocked gasp when his eyes lit on the sign insolently nailed to a bare post on the road edge:

THIS IS
ROME
YOU'LL STAY HERE

"The hell I will!" Johnnie snapped the words out loud, throwing them, like small stones, at the impudent sign. Good Lord—amusement rose and crept over his annoyance—what did these people in Rome have that they thought was so special a man would want to spend the rest of his life here?

Well, for one thing, they had a lot of peace. Johnnie, driving his car slowly down toward the village green, could feel the deep, comfortable quiet seep into his very bones. He had never been in such a peaceful spot. There was a singing clarity in the air he had never noticed anywhere else. And the sunlight was like poured gold. The houses, too, had a special air about them, their diamond-paned windows winking at him merrily as he drove by, and one or two people, working in their gay flower gardens, waved to him heartily, as one would wave to an old and welcome friend.

Besides this, as he passed the square, some boys stopped playing ball to look after him and one of them yelled, "Welcome to Rome, mister!" Then all the high, boyish voices took it up. "Welcome to Rome, mister!" "Welcome—" It made Johnnie feel sort of warm inside. Living here must be pretty nice at that.

But in spite of that he got through the town as quickly as he could. He didn't want the old man, Chadwick, and his little apple-cheeked wife to see him. He felt that, somehow, they might laugh at him—having such a hard time to get out of their town.

However, this time he was taking no chances. On the other side of the village green the wide door of the blacksmith shop was like a black cave, with the red eye of the forge blinking merrily, and the clanging ring of the anvil sounding like deep-throated chimes.

JOHNNIE slid his car to the side of the road and climbed out. For a minute, standing in the blacksmith's door, his sun-filled eyes could make out nothing. Then he saw the man, brawny, huge, his massive shoulders swinging as the hammer swung, his great muscles abulge with strength.

And as Johnnie saw him, he saw Johnnie. He dropped the tool and came over. "A great day, brother," he greeted Johnnie heartily, and then he added, "It is always a great day for Rome when we welcome a stranger." A smile burst joyfully through the torch of his red beard.

Johnnie grinned in answer. "You're a cordial lot here in Rome," he told the blacksmith. "The old man at the restaurant told me the same thing."

"Ah"—the smithy's eyes twinkled—"so you've tasted Dame Patience's cooking! And how do you think you'll like it for a steady diet?"

Johnnie laughed. "No man could fail to like it," he said, "but I'm leaving town just the same. I've business in Bough City."

"So!" roared the smithy heartily. "Have you now?"

"Yes," said Johnnie, "that's why

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I stopped here. I seem to have gotten a bit turned round. I can't quite locate myself. You see, the road I came in on was a detour—" He told about it. "So it wouldn't do me any good to go back the same way. And the other two roads I took were evidently just farm routes or something because they brought me right back to Rome again."

"They did, hey?" The blacksmith leaned forward, interested. "Well, well. Yes—I guess I know which roads they were."

"They went out from the other side of the square there," said Johnnie, "so I thought maybe the road to Bough City would be on this side of town."

"Maybe . . . maybe." The blacksmith nodded his great head slowly. "The fact is, brother," he said confidentially, "I'm not any too sure which road would take you to Bough City. You see," he explained, "it's like this—we don't travel much, we Rome folks. We just sort of stay here. With just horses," he added, "you don't get around the way you do with cars."

"But you have cars!" Johnnie suddenly remembered the ones he'd seen scattered along the road as he came in. "You have lots of cars!"

"Oh—those." The blacksmith seemed to remember them, too. "Yes, that's true. Folks have driven in here from time to time. But once they get here they seem to prefer horses—and a lucky thing for me," he chuckled, "that they do!"

Johnnie joined in the chuckle, but he wasn't to be deflected from his purpose. "About that road to Bough City," he said, "which one would you take?"

"Well"—the smithy scratched his head—"there's two roads over there." He pointed beyond the shop where the village green made its angle. "One of 'em has a fork in it

a little farther up, and I guess, if you want to get to Bough City, they're as good a try as any. But," he added cordially, "Rome's a good place to stay. You'd like it."

"Thanks," said Johnnie, "I'm sure I would. But I've got to be going." He climbed back into his sedan, started her up, waved a salute at the blacksmith, and was on his way.

THE ROAD, in the beginning, promised great things. It was broader than any of the others and much better traveled. It ran past prosperous-looking farms and woodlands that showed stretches of cut timber. And when Johnnie came to the fork, of which the blacksmith had spoken, it was easy to decide which road would lead to the highway because one was so much broader and more businesslike-looking than the other. So Johnnie went speeding on his way with a light heart. And he'd better speed, he told himself firmly, if he wanted to get to Bough City before dark. Because the sunlight was getting mellow with the soft warmth of midafternoon, and the clock on Johnnie's dashboard said quarter of four.

But it couldn't be long now. It certainly couldn't. This was a good road, and the first thing you knew he'd be slithering along once more on the highway. And then— Johnnie's thoughts cracked. He gulped. Ahead of him a familiar white church spire pointed above the green sea of waving trees and, in the stillness, he could hear the steady *gong-gong* of the blacksmith's anvil.

Johnnie sat very still in his cubbyhole behind the driver's wheel. His stomach went a little queer, and his spine felt as if cold fingers were touching it—lightly. He moved his hands suddenly on the polished surface in front of him so he wouldn't notice too much the way his wrists were tingling. They'd tingled the same way when, as a boy, he'd listened to ghost stories by the flickering light of a dying campfire.

But, gosh, there was nothing ghostly about this town. Nothing queer. To prove it he said out loud, and very distinctly:

"There's nothing wrong with these roads. Nothing. It's not in the least strange that I keep coming back here. I'm just—well, stupid, that's all."

That was it. He was stupid. He found the thought deliciously consoling, and he played it up. He was just some kind of a prize nitwit to keep getting on these crazy merry-go-round roads that always brought him back to Rome again. And wouldn't the blacksmith and that old couple laugh if they knew the time he was having?

"Ha-ha!" Johnnie laughed gayly at the thought. "Ha-ha, ha-ha, ha-*ha!*" Well, that ought to convince anybody—including himself—that he understood the whole thing was only a joke. But even a joke can go too far. Johnnie stopped laughing and sobered down. All right—maybe he hadn't used his head. Maybe he had been stupid. But he'd do better this time. He'd get out of this town now—or know the reason why.

He shifted his gears and eased his car forward, swinging around and into the second road the blacksmith had mentioned.

And a terrible road it turned out to be. Worse, much worse, than the original detour that had brought him in to Rome. It jumped and joggled, battering his car this way and that. It was choked with head-size rocks and blocked by boulders. It

was, obviously, a road that was used for nothing but lugging in firewood —and if it had been possible for Johnnie to turn his car between its steep gullies he would have done so, gladly. A return to Rome, he told himself firmly, would be a thousand times better than this endless liver-juggling battle.

So THAT when, through the golden haze of sunset, Johnnie actually saw the clustered houses, the spreading market green and the slim-spired church just ahead of him he was delighted. He really was. To prove it he said it out loud.

"I'm glad," he stated convincingly, "to get back here. I wouldn't be on the road to Bough City for . . . for anything!" Because now he suddenly realized that it was supper time and that just across the green was the little house where Dame Patience cooked her succulent viands. Johnnie's mouth sprang to watering in anticipation of remembered delights—so that he was able to put out of his mind all his recent qualms and uncertainties and dwell solely on his state of consuming hunger, and upon the stunned surprise of the two old folks when they saw him walk in.

But when he did open the door and walk in to the cozy cheer of the little room they both looked up and greeted him with no surprise whatever. A fact that knocked at once between his shoulder blades with small cold knuckles.

And the opening remark of the old man didn't help much, either. For he looked up from the peg he was whittling and said, happily: "Mamma's baked your cake for you, son—and me, I went out and caught you some brook trout. Thought they'd go nicely after your trip."

"Trip?" said Johnnie. "Trip?" His wrists were feeling funny again. And there was a chunk of chilled lead in his chest. *They knew he was coming back.* They knew what those roads would do to him!

But the next instant he'd pushed his panic down. Nuts, he told himself. They didn't know anything of the sort. They just thought, in their blessed innocence, that he'd gone to Bough City and was on his way back. Sure—that was it. Sure. Johnnie dragged up a cheerful grin, put it gayly on his face, and presented it to them.

Then he sat down and did delighted justice to the brook trout while Dame Patience pored over his case of samples, choosing what she'd like in barter for the meal.

She chose the treasured cake mixer. And by the time she'd done that, and Johnnie had brushed the last crumbs of chocolate cake from his still-smiling lips, he'd made up his mind what he'd do. He wouldn't fool around any more with these uncertain roads out of Rome. There was nothing peculiar about them, of course; it was just that he was a stranger in these parts and he'd been stupid enough to keep on taking wrong turns.

But Johnnie wasn't having any more—thank you. Johnnie was going to play safe. He'd take the same road out, now, that he'd come in on this morning. It would take him back to the torn-up highway—and Lord knew where he'd go from there —but at least he'd get out of Rome, and he could cross other bridges when he came to them.

So he bade the old people a definite good-by. Very definite. He wasn't coming back this way ever again and he wanted them to understand it.

"Sho," said the old man. "Sho.

I can see where a busy man like you would be sort of reluctant to stay here in a little town. But it wouldn't be so bad. You'd learn to like it. If you're so fond of fishing, there's the brook trout—"

"No!" Johnnie forgot his manners; his face got red and he almost shouted. "I'm going to Bough City!"

"Sho," said the old man. "Sho—I didn't mean anything."

"You'd better not," mumbled Johnnie. He climbed into his car and slammed the door. But he ground down the window and leaned out long enough to say, "I don't suppose there's any place in this town a man could get gas?"

"Gas? Oh—gasoline. No, we don't use—"

JOHNNIE didn't wait to hear more. He eased in his gears and got going. He wanted to get out of this place, and get out fast.

And as he drove along he congratulated himself on his decision to return on this road. It was the only thing to do. He was familiar with this road. He knew it. He knew where it began and where it ended. There weren't any forks or crossroads or anything on it, either, to confuse him. This road would get him out of Rome. Johnnie clutched the wheel and stared ahead.

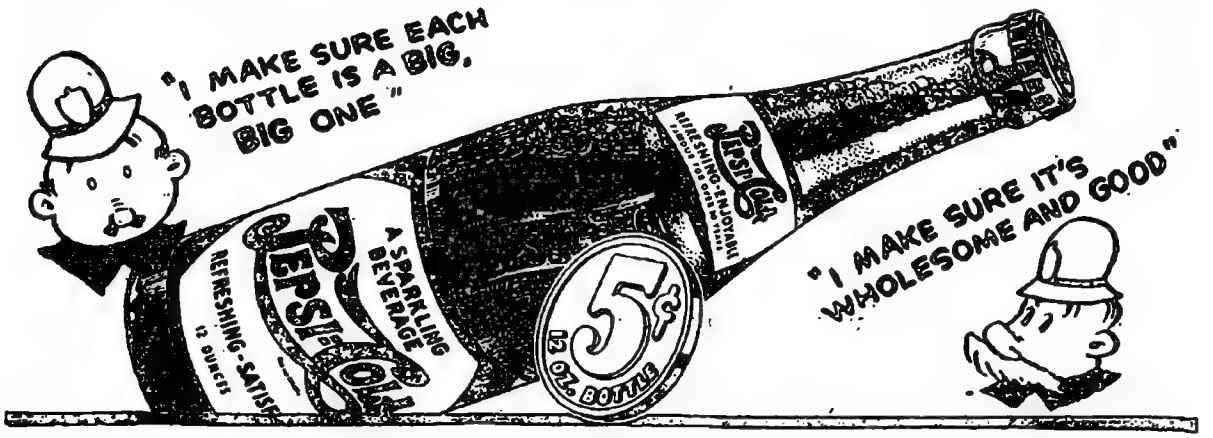
The road wound on and on. Darkness had fallen while he had been at supper and the whole landscape was shrouded in purple shadow. In the east a lemon-colored haze showed where the moon would rise, but for now there was no light beyond the yellow tunnel of illumination cut by Johnnie's own headlights.

He drove on and on. The road was just as he remembered it, wandering and uncertain. But it wouldn't be long now. It had taken him a little more than an hour to make the trip in to Rome that morning, so, an hour out of the town, he began to keep an eye out for the convergence with the main highway.

But by now Johnnie had something else to worry about. The gas in his tank was lower than low. And if he should be left stranded without gas, out in the middle of this no man's land— Johnnie shuddered faintly. It was a possibility the mere contemplation of which wouldn't bear dwelling upon.

And the next moment he knew he would never have to dwell upon it. For, in very fact, the worst had happened. The motor of his car gave one long and gentle sigh—and quietly expired.

"Now this," said Johnnie out loud.



And jumped at the sound of his own voice. For, now that his motor had stopped, the singing stillness of the deep country poured up to envelop him. Katydids and tree toads held duets; crickets chirped; a distant owl hooted and frogs from a nearby swamp glugged brazenly. But over these sounds, and around and through them, was a hush that was profound and deep and everlasting. It stuffed his ears with its silence and he had to gulp against it.

He reached in, then, and switched off his headlights. The darkness swooped up to join the stillness. And Johnnie waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the still-moonless night.

BUT IF JOHNNIE had hoped to see any sign of the highway near at hand, he must have been disappointed—for the little road still ambled along, pale in the gloom and flanked by the massed blackness of small trees and bushes.

"And that's all right, too," said Johnnie firmly. "The highway's right around the next bend, most likely. Yeah—that's it. Right around the next bend." So he started walking.

He plugged on and on. Miles. It seemed to him, thousands of them. On and on. The moon came up, washing the world in silver, and turning from a mammoth orange platter at the horizon to a cool silver plate sailing high. Johnnie's city-bred feet burned like live flame; the muscles of his legs pulled and ached; ruts made him stumble and brambles reached out, snapping at his ankles.

And the lump of chilled lead came back and sat on his stomach, growing heavier and colder, till the weight of it pulled at his shoulders and the cold of it was an icy breath shrouding him.

The road took on a nightmarish quality. Things reached out to grab at him—roots and the branches of trees. Things gibbered at him—those damn tree frogs—and snickered. The moonlight seemed like tinkled laughter—and the moon itself bounced a little in the sky, mirthfully.

The road came to an end. Johnnie saw the end of it, and he stopped stock-still, staring at the lights that glimmered, dancing cheerily, through the trees. But it wasn't only the lights that told him. It was a sign. A sign on a nearby tree; so splashed by moonlight that its black block letters stood clear.

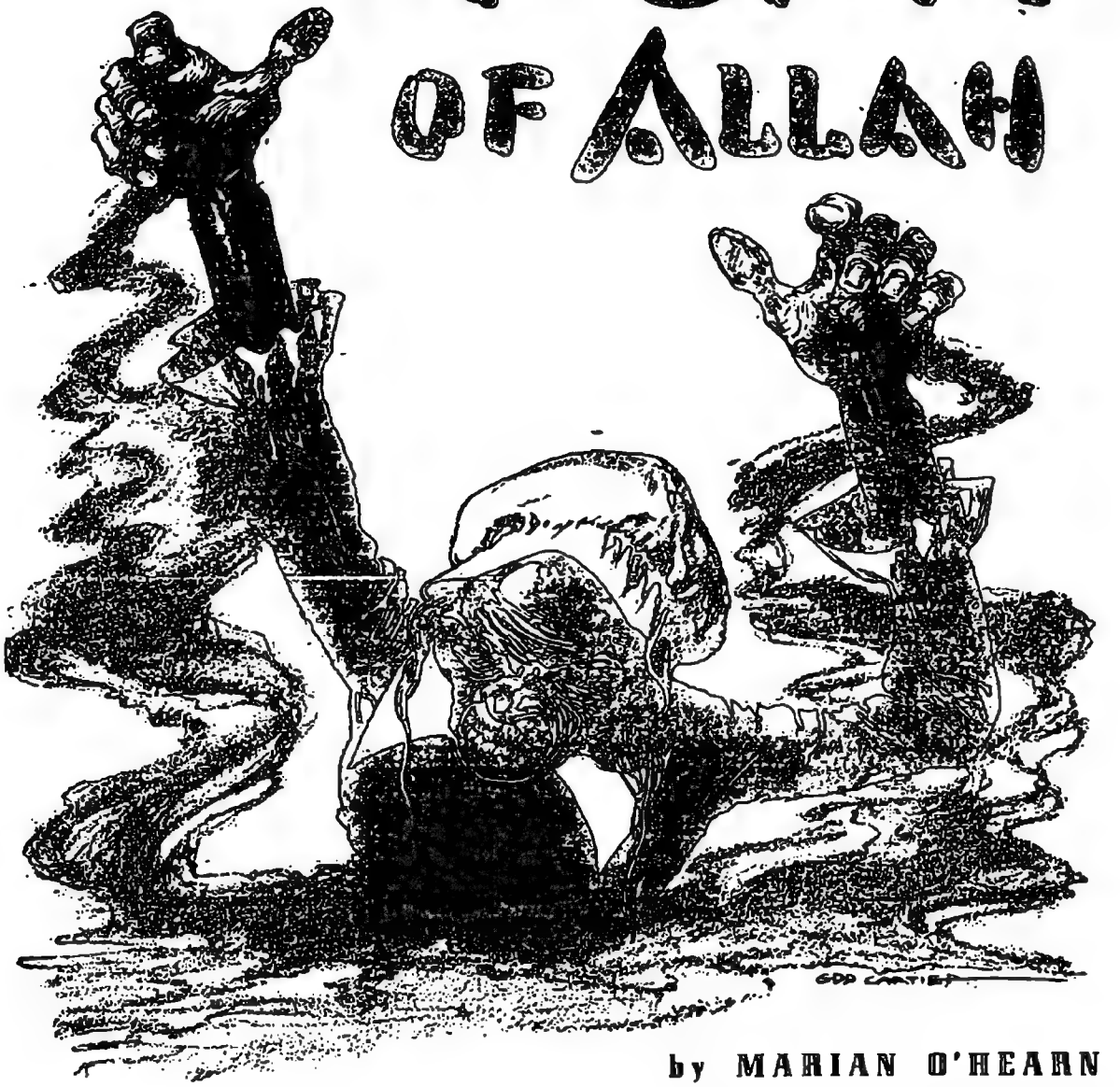
It said simply:

ALL ROADS
LEAD
TO ROME.

Johnnie sat down slowly. Now that it had happened he could bear to face the fact that he'd known all along—for a long time, anyway. And everyone in town had known, too. He remembered the things they'd said. "It's always a great day for Rome when a stranger arrives." "We need a machinist." "You'll be happy here." "You can live in the house Jonathan built—it's sweet with seven windows."

Johnnie grinned slowly. He understood the great quantity of lights, now shining through the trees. It would, he considered, be quite a party. The whole town waiting to welcome him. Knowing he'd be back; knowing, by their long experience, that nothing they could say would convince him; that each stranger had to tramp the roads himself to learn, finally, that—all roads lead to Rome.

THE SPARK OF ALLAH



by MARIAN O'HEARN

In the chaos of the French Revolution, Demal, with the aid of a strange crystal, attempts to find some order—and finds the immortal witch, Lilith! Second of Three Parts.

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

SYNOPSIS.

Too well-born to be cared for by the Commune of the newly created French Revolutionary government, not prominent enough to be persecuted by them, Demal was simply ignored—and allowed to starve as he wished. Weak with hunger, he was watching the march of the street-women as they stormed out through the rain to attack the Tuileries, to drive out the still-

lingering traces of the hated royalty, Queen Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI. Weak with hunger, he is almost trampled under the mob when he is saved by a girl, Lucille Favras, and her maid, an incredibly aged Negress, Octavia. A strange ring Lucille Favras wears seems the seat of some deadly power, a glare from her curious green eyes makes an angry soldier fall dead.

Swept on to the Tuileries in the mob, Lucille Favras gives Demal a bit of food, commands him to get for her a little globe of crystal that, she says, Marie Antoinette has stolen from her. He is to recognize it by the fact that it glows with a blue light when touched by human flesh. Demal agrees unwillingly, half mystified, half in fear of this strange woman, yet half in love with her beauty.

He is separated from her when he succeeds in getting the crystal by accident—and discovers its power! So long as he holds it, whatever he commands of anyone, that person will do. Known as "The Spark of Allah," supposedly given Marie Antoinette by Cagliostro, the great magician, it definitely has unearthly powers. Meeting Lucille Favras again, he finds that, while he holds that crystal, he is immune to her commands, immune to the deadly glare of her angry eyes that kills the coachman who, at Demal's command, is taking him back to Paris.

Knowing now the power of the crystal, he sees in it the salvation of the country he loves. France, in the hands of half-mad extremists, is being destroyed. But, since every man he commands must obey, so long as he holds the crystal, Demal realizes he can, single-handed, take command of the new government, and raise up a structure that will eliminate the iniquities of the old royal government and the excesses of the revolutionary regime.

He enters the meeting place of the leaders of the revolution and forces them to agree to give him a place on the Commune, then, with Marat, one of the prime movers of the revolution, goes to see Cagliostro. Demal wants to learn from the famous magician something more of the powers of this strange crystal, something of its history, and something of the history of Lucille Favras. For Lucille's face keeps appearing in dark corners, watching him, her green eyes seeming to spy on his every movement—

At ten thirty, Demal left the Hotel des Rivoles and took a carriage to the Avenue de Kleber. He dismissed the hack at the end of the street and started for No. 10 on foot. This part of the city was poorly lighted and the avenue was made additionally gloomy by overhanging trees, so that he could see nothing except one pin point of light, far down the block. That was probably the house he sought. His stride slackened and stopped. Wind was striking him full in the face, forcing him back. Wind like a thousand pushing devils. But there was no sound of its raging, no echo as it swept from the ground. No, this was not wind, but a force he could not touch or feel, and it was jamming against him. He thrust out his arms, but his clutching hands felt only air. The gloom ahead turned into blackness which took on definite form—shaping into the outline of a woman. As he tried to catch his breath in the face of the soundless wind, he recognized that wavering outline. Lucille Favras. Even her face was clear now, as if surrounded by a faint light, and she was moving toward him, holding his eyes, swimming through the gloom with her arms lifted.

Paralysis was sapping him of strength, and his legs, having lost all sensation, seemed to be melting away from beneath him. The green, shimmering fire of her gaze was coming dazzlingly close and he wanted to close his eyes. Abruptly, a deep, rumbling laugh sounded—the chesty laughter of the old crone, Octavia. The sound seemed to stop Lucille Favras' approach and the image of her became blurred. Demal's brain cleared and with sweating, frantic haste he got his hand into the pocket which held the crystal. And, as his fingers touched it, there was nothing before him except the thick gloom. Or was that, once more, the sound

of old Octavia's croaking laughter?

He waited, feeling as spent as if he had gone through some terrific physical battle. The noiseless wind was gone, but there was a pounding in his ears; the echo of his own roaring blood.

Still he stared into the darkness, trying to pierce it and find something beyond. If Lucille had actually come toward him and Octavia's laughter aroused him, why should the old Negress have warned him—unless she had taken it for granted that he was helpless?

THERE WAS a quick, scraping sound behind him and he whirled, only to realize that footsteps were slapping down the walk. "Who's that?" he demanded sharply.

"It's me—Marat! In the name of a name, what's happened?"

"Nothing," Demal said, after a second's pause. "Are we near Cagliostro's place?"

"Yes, here." Marat darted down the walk, passed the light and went to a gate well in the shadows. "This is No. 10. Come in."

They entered a small garden and crossed to a building which seemed completely unlighted. But when Marat knocked on a low door with quick, precise strokes, it opened and a dim glow showed a robed, heavily veiled girl. She said softly, "Who comes to the master?"

"I . . . I, Marat, and a friend."

"Enter." She closed the door and led them into a small, high-ceilinged cubicle where diaphanous veils drooped from the ceilings, decorated the walls and covered the furniture. Seated on couches were five motionless women. They were robed but wore no veils over their heads, and they stared straight before them with unblinking, glazed eyes. All of them were young and pretty—and none of them was aware that anyone had entered the room even when the men passed directly before them.

"Novitiates," Marat whispered, "people preparing to enter the order of Cagliostro as students and servants."

The girl waved for them to hurry and threw open a second door which showed a well-equipped, businesslike office. At the desk was another feminine figure, carefully concealed in veils and robes.

"Monsieur Marat," she said in a striking monotone, "the master did not expect you and he is conducting ceremonies. Tonight five of the chosen are being accepted. Will you wait for him?"

"No. We'll go and watch. We won't be a disturbance?"

The girl hesitated. "Of course, you, yourself, monsieur, have been here before, but your friend I'm afraid—"

"I'll vouch for him. It'll be all right."

Without waiting for her answer, Marat turned out of the office, gesturing Demal with him, and made for a room much like the one they had left except that here the waiting, motionless figures were swathed in black. At the end of this room was a small, shoulder-high door which Marat opened, and they went down two steps into a room many times the size of the one they had left. Heavy curtains covered every inch of the walls so that all windows were completely hidden and only five small lights showed at the head of the room, where, suspended from the ceiling, were great funeral cloths marked with the outlines of skeletons. Below them was an altar, covered with black velvet which trailed over strange mounds and spilled down to the floor. The tiny, flick-

ering lights glistened on these mounds and after a moment Demal realized that they were piles of human bones, stacked up below the altar.

Just before the heaped skeletons stood a tall, heavy man, robed in a shroudlike costume. He was standing utterly still, hands clasped and eyes raised. The dim light danced from the bones to his face, showing the flatness of his great nose and the length of his jaw. His mouth, full and unsteady, seemed to be trembling in unison with a roll of fat which lay beneath his chin.

"That's Cagliostro," Marat hissed.

SITTING on the floor were five men, all naked, and all apparently in a state of semiconsciousness. On the floor, beside each man, were three black cups, and as the magician lowered his eyes and unclasped his hands, they each picked up one of the cups and drank. Putting them down, they lifted the next cup, and after drinking from all three, sank back into a state of dazed apathy.

Cagliostro moved his hand in a straight-armed gesture and from behind the altar strode three figures dressed in military uniforms. Over their arms they carried strips of blue ribbon and dangling from their hands were disks of copper. They moved toward the men sitting on the floor and, kneeling, dipped the ribbons in small jars, bringing them up crimson and dripping with blood. Slowly, they tied the ribbons around the foreheads of the "novitiates" and with even more deliberation fastened the copper disks about their throats. Then they snapped back to their feet and disappeared behind the altar. From the gloom itself came six phantomlike shapes whose bodies gave off a phosphorescent glow. They held great-bladed swords in their hands and, as they approached, the swords were raised high. Lowering them, they dipped the points into the jars of blood and marked circles, triangles and interlocking squares on the naked backs of the men wearing the blood-stained headbands. The symbols finished, they faded into the gloom and returned, bearing a carpet which they spread on the floor. The new members of the cult knelt on it and, at a gesture from Cagliostro, a fire was lighted at the base of the altar. It sprang up into thin, reaching lines of red.

"Look, now," Marat whispered. "Watch—"

The fire thickened and lowered, as if the tall blaze had been bent in two. A cloud of smoke danced away from the fire, floating over the bent backs of those kneeling on the carpet. Slowly, weirdly, the ball of smoke returned to the fire and began to spread. And as Demal stared, he saw the smoke take the form of a face. A gigantic face from which huge teeth gleamed. The eyes were huge, too, and were as real as those of the men facing the fire. They were green—flaming, seething green and their blaze seared the brain!

Demal felt drugged weariness falling over him even as he muttered: "Lucille's eyes—he has the eyes of Lucille Favras. They glitter like the emerald."

He knew that he had to stop looking into the boiling green of the smoke phantom's gaze, and with tremendous, laboring effort got his hand on the crystal. Instantly, the face above the fire was only an outline. But—it was speaking, thundering: "Repeat after me these words, to be kept unto death and unto the fourth death which will unite us all into one great being:

"I will be faithful until the fourth

death and surrender myself to the will of my spiritual master in all things pertaining to body, mind and soul. I swear it in the symbol of the blood."

A gong sounded and the kneeling men threw themselves onto their faces. The curtains behind the altar parted to show a waiting woman. Her head was lifted and her body tense, while all the light from the tapers flooded over her, leaving the rest of the room in darkness. She was dressed in a flowing robe of white which fell from shoulders to feet without concealing the lines of her figure, but there was no veil over her head. Instead, she wore a diadem of diamonds. Slowly, she started down the black-covered steps, keeping her eyes straight before her, moving like a somnambulist. There was not even the sound of breathing in all the great room, and Demal tasted a strange excitement. Who and what was this woman? Every line of her figure was perfection, and her skin gave off a soft glow of its own. Her head was that of a goddess.

Cagliostro waited until she reached his side and then he stepped back while she proceeded to the kneeling men. As she stopped before the first one, he got to his feet, and she blew into his face. The gong rang and she moved on to the next, repeating the gesture.

Demal heard the whisper of a chuckle beside him and Marat murmured, "She's wonderful, isn't she?"

"Who— What is she?"

Marat's wizened yellow face wrinkled into a grotesque smile. "Cagliostro's wife. She acts as his high priestess."

The last of the novitiates had received her breath on his face and was once more prostrate. Solemnly, the woman returned to the altar, and Demal's breath rasped through the hush, for as she turned, her eyes touched his—and they were fire-threaded green!

Lucille. Was she everywhere about him, waiting constantly to match her power against that of the Spark of Allah? Or hoping for the moment when he might be off guard? His hand closed over the glass ball and the features of the high priestess seemed to change and lose some of their beauty. Her eyes, still on him, were no longer molten green jewels, but a vague gray.

Marat gave a sudden dry hack which he meant for a laugh. "There," he said. "That's the gong which ends it."

The sound boomed five times and the woman mounted the steps to disappear behind the curtains. Cagliostro's arms shot up and formed into the shape of a square. Then he turned and marched majestically from the room.

"Come," Marat murmured. "We'll find him in his office now."

A SHROUDED figure opened the door of the office and Cagliostro, still in his white funeral robe, got up as Marat entered. But his glance flickered to Demal and his eyes narrowed.

"This is Monsieur Henri de Demal," Marat said. "He persuaded me to bring him here."

The contracted, hardened pupils bored through the space between them. "You know that I don't receive strangers, Jean."

Demal smiled and looked down on him. "I'm not exactly a stranger, Count di Cagliostro. I came on business important to you."

The magician's gaze looked into that of Demal, his head thrust forward and his body tense as if for a feat of strength. But then his

Demal held the writhing, terrified little creature in his hand in fascinated astonishment.

heavy face changed and the pupils of his eyes widened, one of his hands dropped to the desk as if for support and he lowered himself into a chair.

"Sit down . . . sit down, gentlemen." His words were breathless and hurried, but he did not even glance at Marat. There was a gray tinge under his skin and he gripped the arms of his chair.

Demal felt the man's sudden fear as sharply as if it were a palpable thing.

"Where do you come from, friend?" The sorcerer's words sounded weak.

"From across your own path, along the same trail," Demal said.

Cagliostro nodded and sweat appeared on his grayish forehead. "Yes, I thought so." He was struggling, fighting to hold onto himself and the moment. "But let me tell you from where and how you came—This is easy for me. I can tell all men from what they have sprung."

"I'm listening," Demal murmured and wished that Marat would not crouch so close to him, for his unkempt body was a stench in his nostrils.

"Good." Cagliostro lifted a hand and flicked the bright drops of sweat from his face. "Look directly at what I put before you and empty your mind of thought."

He shoved a smooth-topped rock into the middle of the desk and Demal studied its streaked agate surface. "Concentrate, friend—concentrate."

Demal fixed his glance on it, aware of the other's searching eyes and the black fear which was shaking him. The seconds ticked by and Marat's breath became noisy. Another second melted and finally Demal shrugged. "It's tiresome sitting like this, Count di Cagliostro. Can't we begin?"

"No." The word was hoarse. "No—we have indeed traveled the same path, because I . . . I . . . Cagliostro, the Unfortunate Child of Nature, the pupil of Althotas—can see nothing and learn nothing."

Demal lifted his glance from the agate rock. "Then, we'll talk of my reason for coming. I was told"—he paused, holding the shallow eyes—"that you knew the history and the powers of the Spark of Allah, since it once belonged to you."

A shadow clamped over Cagliostro's wet face and his loose lips parted. "The Spark of Allah—is that something which could be owned?"

"Yes"—grinning. "It's a crystal that turns blue when touched by a human hand and it's said to hold great power. You gave it to Marie Antoinette while you were in her favor—at least, that's the story."

THE GREAT HANDS were clutching the chair arms violently, and the gray, sensual mask of a face was distorted as an image of torturous death. Demal could feel a storm beating over him, striking like sharp wind as the magician struggled to bring his will under control. "I . . . owned a crystal like that?" The words came out rawly. "I wish I had . . . I wish I did! But would I give it to a brainless one like the queen? She would probably use it for a paper weight!"

Demal nodded. "That's what I thought. Still, having heard the story, I wanted to make sure. Thank you for your time, sir."

He got up, towering over the magician, who seemed unable to rise. But as Marat also stood, Cagliostro tore himself from the chair. "Wait—monsieur. You interest me—not

because of the crystal, but for powers you, yourself, possess. I can't let you go until we've discussed things known only to the few."

Marat interrupted. "We've business to do that can't wait, count."

The eagerness in his hollow whispering of a voice made Demal look at the little man whose yellow face was aglow with terrible greed.

"You, Marat." Cagliostro's laugh was feeble. "We all know how affairs call you, but perhaps Monsieur de Demal would be good enough to remain here tonight as my guest."

"Of course not—"

"On the contrary," Demal broke into Marat's words, "I'm pleased to do so—and honored."

"You'll stay . . . stay here?" Marat demanded, wheeling like an outraged child. "Then I, too, remain! You don't mind?" he demanded of the magician.

"Certainly not. Now I'll have you shown to your rooms and later, perhaps, we can talk again."

He touched a bell on his desk and two girls shrouded in robes and veils appeared in the doorway. "Take the gentlemen to their rooms. They are staying for the night—the Room of the Sunrise for Monsieur Demal. The Place of Night for Monsieur Marat."

The robed figures bowed and shuffled off, to lead the way up a stairway. On the upper floor, Demal was shown into a huge chamber, where the walls were tinted with the first colors of dawn and thin, delicately shaded veils drooped from the ceiling.

One of the shrouded women followed him inside, closed the door and glided to his side. "If monsieur pleases—" She thrust him gently into a chair and, kneeling, unfastened his shoes, removing them tenderly.

Seen so closely, the girl's face could be discerned through the veil and it was youthfully lovely. A mouth which was quick with life, and her eyes, lifting to his— He jerked forward. Had they suddenly glittered as if light had struck an emerald? Was there a gleam of flame in their depths?

He sprang up. "I'll take care of the rest myself."

"Very well, sir. There's a night robe on the bed." She went out softly and he put on the latch before turning back to see that the robe was much like the one Cagliostro had been wearing at the "ceremonies." A funereal affair of white.

He undressed and pulled it over his head. But when he threw himself down on the bed, he left one light burning beside him, and clutched in his fist was the Spark of Allah. Sleep touched him almost at once and he dropped into a heavy slumber which seemed to last only a moment before he was awakened.

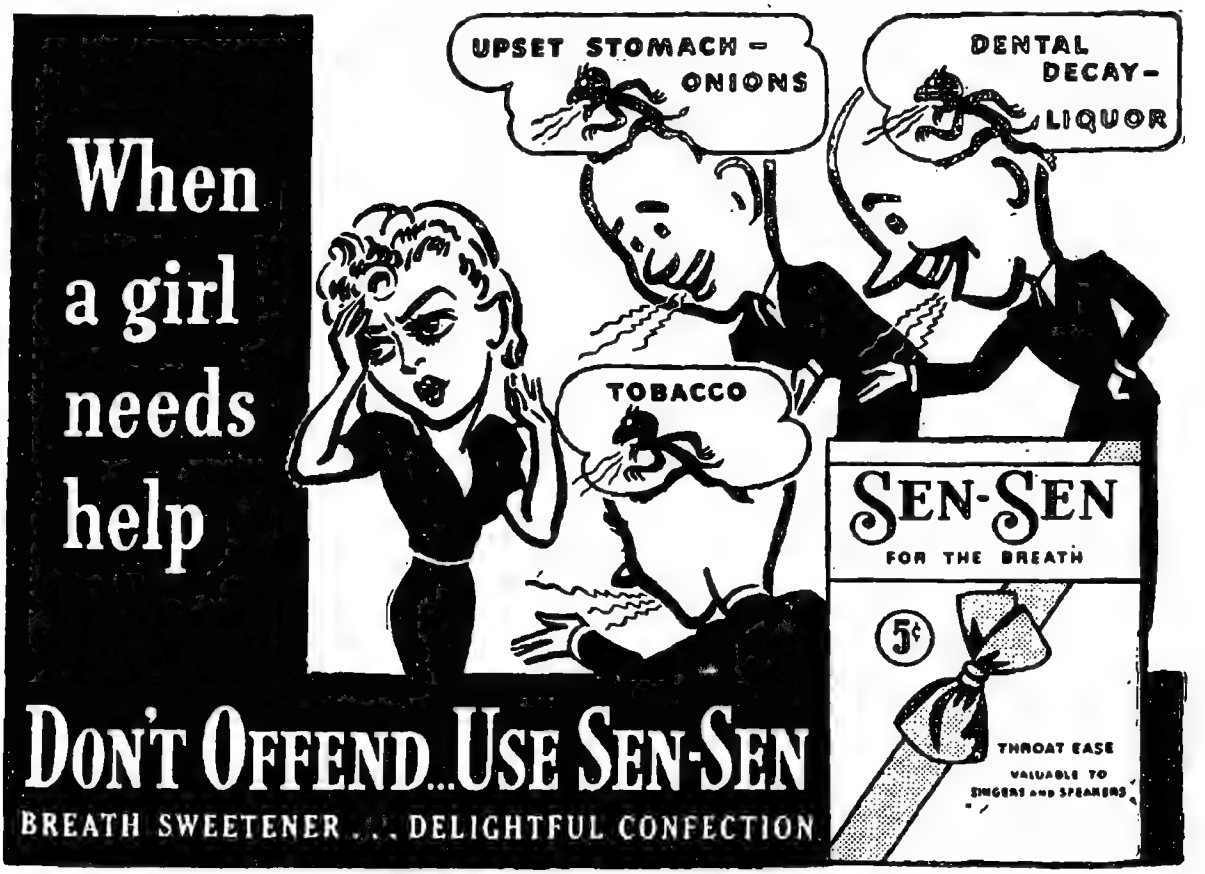
As soon as his eyes opened, he was completely conscious and aware of the crystal in his fingers. Lifting his head, he looked around the room and saw that everything was just as it had been when he fell asleep. But there was a sound—movement—close to him. He narrowed his eyes to peer at the shadows spreading from the farther wall and felt his blood begin to hammer through his veins, as the shadows formed into a vague outline. Would Lucille's eyes be looking at him in another moment? Was there no place he could be free of the hell blaze of her commanding stare?

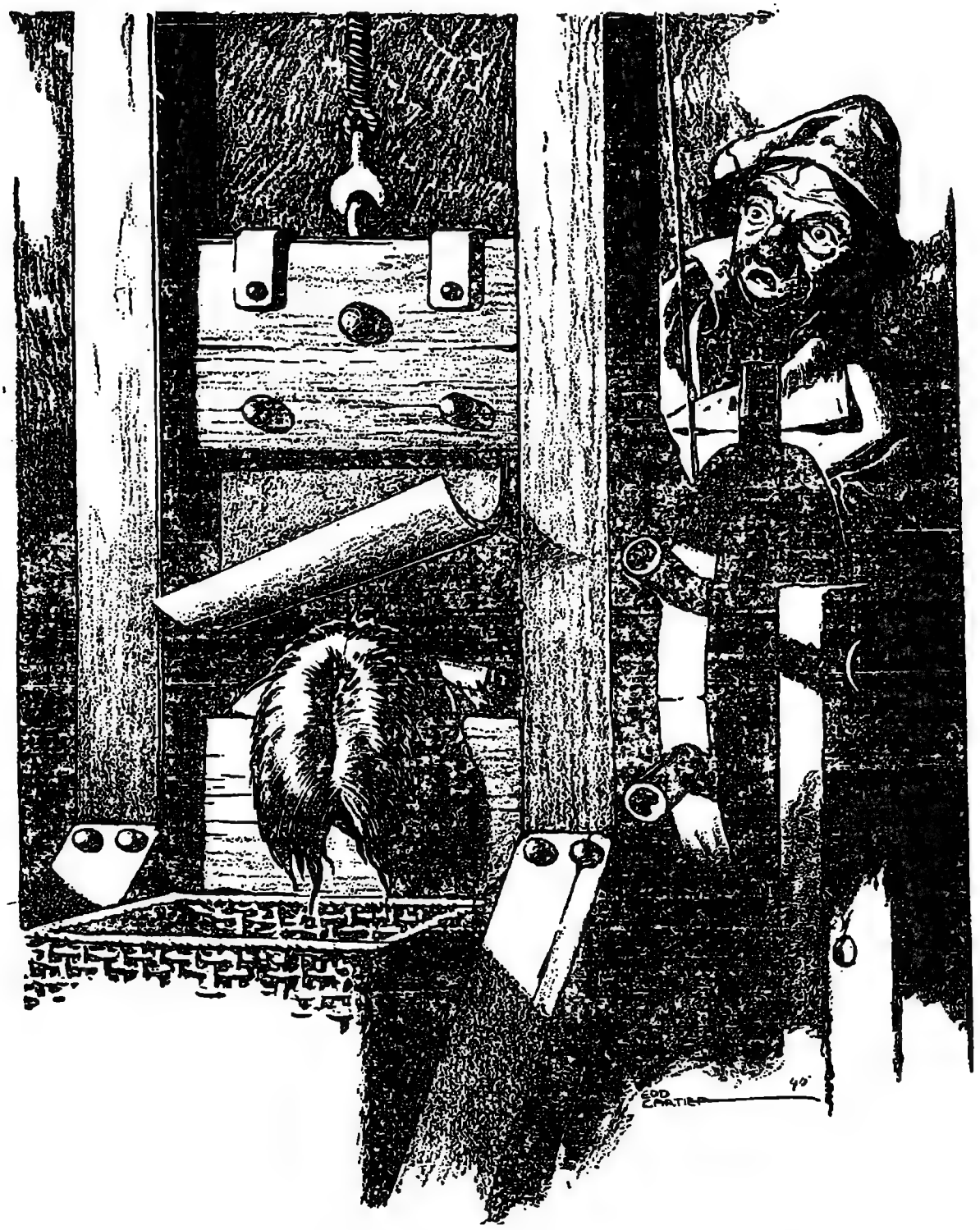
But then he dropped his head back onto the pillows with a grin, for the shadows were only that and held no outline of anything. The

noise came again—tiny and creaking, but clear, as if sounding from a a chair opposite his bed on which he had left his clothing when he undressed. He fixed his gaze on the chair, but there was nothing near it and it stood well out from the wall. Scowling, he sat up, and then his coat, draped over the back of the chair, actually moved as if pulled aside by a hand. He waited, feeling coldness in his breath and ice along his spine. Now his trousers were being lifted—and there was still nothing near the chair! Carefully, he swung his feet to the floor, poising for the first noiseless step. The garments shook violently, and then, from beneath them, emerged a little creature, a doll, some six inches in height. Busily, the doll's arms worked, as it jerked and pulled on the trousers until it was able to climb up to the chair.

Cagliostro was even greater than Demal had thought. Imagine contriving a mechanical creature so tiny that it would not be noticed when it slipped in to steal the crystal!

But— This was not a doll! It was a human being—a fully developed woman, six inches in height and tiny enough to be engulfed in a man's hand. Slowly, slowly, he bent down to it, caged it swiftly but carefully as a boy capturing a butterfly, and moved back to the light. It fluttered and fought and its little breath was a tiny jet of warmth against his fingers. Keeping thumb and forefinger pressed firmly around the bit of a waist, he held





The great blade stopped halfway — and its edge curled up like a bit of charred paper —

it under the light. A head and face only twice the size of his thumbnail, a body perfectly, exquisitely made with all the curves of womanhood, dressed in a long silk frock. The face was lovely, dimples flashed in glowing cheeks as the little creature smiled pleadingly and deep-blue eyes watched him in terror. The brown-gold hair was perfectly coiffured and from the little body came delicate scent.

Demal set the infinitesimal creature down, warning her: "If you run to the edge of the table, you'll fall and be killed. Now, tell me what you are and why Count Cagliostro sent you here."

But at his first words, she staggered back with her face white and sick. Pitifully, she lifted little hands to cover her ears against the sound of his voice. Her lips were moving frantically. She was talking, but he could hear nothing of what she said, for the voice tones were too small to register on the tympanum of his ears.

He picked her up again and held her close to his face, but her obviously shrieked words were a tiny breath on his cheek. He spoke very softly and carefully. "I can't hear you. Now try—"

But she was shrinking again, protecting her ears, and he stopped. If she were a creature of Cagliostro's, something which his magic had monstrously reduced to this size, there had to be some means of communicating with her—

A soft knock struck the door and, holding the creature in his hand, he moved to answer. "Oh, Count di Cagliostro! I wanted to see you about this—" He thrust out his hand, but the magician, his face distorting in an agonizing effort, had flung up his arm, making a strange signal.

Then, under Demal's stare, the sorcerer wilted against the wall, his eyes closing weakly. But he managed to say, "About what, monsieur—"

"This . . . this." He pushed out his hand—only to discover that he held nothing. The tiny woman he had grasped so carefully was gone.

Cagliostro was straightening, apparently recovering his strength, and Demal backed away, his fingers tightening on the crystal.

"But you are showing me nothing, monsieur!"

"I know that. I should have remembered I am in the home of the world's greatest magician."

"Thank you, monsieur, but I think of myself as a physician of the spirit, not as a magician. I came at this hour so that we could talk without being disturbed."

Demal nodded. "Let's sit down. I hope you've decided to tell me about the Spark of Allah."

Cagliostro, taking a chair well away from Demal, shook his head. "You still speak in riddles because I know nothing about it.

"Wait"—as Demal started to speak. "I must give you a message. You're in great danger. While I was meditating, as I always do before sleeping, I fell into a trance. I saw things in the trance, monsieur, and I warn you of death because you have stolen supernatural power—taken it for yourself. From the womb of time comes one who will destroy you. This one is a woman so beautiful she cannot be human."

His voice trailed off and as it died, the room sank into chill stillness. Demal's hand, hidden from the other's sight, played with the crystal, and suddenly he grinned at Cagliostro.

"No," he said solemnly, getting to his feet and staring into the shal-

low eyes. "It's you who are in danger, count. The greatest danger you've ever faced, and you must never again allow yourself to go into a trance. I command you."

Cagliostro's face was washed of color until it resembled that of a corpse. His mouth moved, the muscles of his throat worked violently, and finally he clenched both hands on his own neck as if to stop the convulsing of muscles. Blindly, he got up, pushing against some crushing, invisible weight, and staggered for the door. Finding the handle at last, he jerked at it and sprang, running, into the hall.

DEMAL FOLLOWED to the doorway and, standing in it, looked after him. But the magician had already disappeared and the hall was filled with impenetrable darkness. Was the darkness stirring again, taking on the outline of a woman's body?

He demanded abruptly, "Who's hiding there?"

Marat stepped, blinking, into the faint light—ludicrous in a long white sleeping robe and dirty kerchief tied about his head. "I just came . I came to talk with you and saw Cagliostro running away. Let me in, monsieur."

Demal's gesture was curt. "Come in and be careful to say the right thing."

He fixed the door latch and then marched across the room to confront the terrorist. "Now."

Marat screwed his yellow face into what he hoped was a smile. "It's not like that at all, monsieur. Look—I've seen what happened here tonight. Cagliostro is the most feared man in all Europe. He's the Devil's servant if not the old one himself and I've seen him turn human beings into things without souls or minds—things which lived only to obey his desires. He has created life from nothing and turned brass into gold. Don't laugh at me, monsieur, for some of the greatest scientists in the world have witnessed the same things and known no explanation. But Cagliostro is afraid of you."

Demal sat down, watching the cadaverous face. "What does that mean to you?"

"Everything. Don't you realize that the life of France—her very existence—is threatened? This supposed revolution—what is it? A farce handled by blunderers and fools—worse, by people who are keeping the country from ever again having proper government. There is only one hope—a man strong enough to swing everyone to his side, to take charge and stamp out all opposition, to rally the people as one unit instead of a hundred different factions—"

"Wait," Demal broke in. "You're not addressing the Commune now. What are you getting at?"

"You!" Marat shouted, springing to his feet. "Whatever Cagliostro's afraid of—whatever I'm afraid of—it's a power the people will obey. Together, we can save France!"

Demal laughed, but the laugh died into a dry grin. "Why this idea? No one ever thought of using Cagliostro's power, although he has plenty of it—"

"*Phaw!* That spawn of the Devil—the people would faint from terror if he appeared before them."

"How do you propose to make me the leader who'll be able to command?"

"Easy. Tomorrow, we'll meet the leaders at the Cordeliers. They will know, just as I do, that they must not cross you. After that, you'll be proposed for a seat on the Commune and on the Citizens' Committee.

Then, we'll organize, fast—send your message over the whole country! The leaders will be your lieutenants and carry out your will."

"And you think that can be done?" But he was looking past Marat and seeing all of France. Seeing it at peace, prosperous, with an idle guillotine and without hunger.

"Yes." He got up, not even hearing Marat's reply. "We'll start in the morning. I'll meet you at the door of the Cordeliers at noon. Now, we'll both get some sleep."

The other man stumbled from his chair, but as he reached the door, Demal said: "You tell me Cagliostro can take the mind and spirit from those who join his cult. Can he change them physically, too? Reduce their size?"

"Ah." Marat paused. "You're speaking of his sylphids. He has several and no one knows the answer. Some say that they're the greatest beauties of the land whom he reduced to the size of his hand because they refused his advances. Still—" He shrugged.

"Good night."

The door closed after Marat, but Demal did not return to bed. Instead, he went to the windows and stared out at the night. France, torn and bloody now, would know happiness again because he held the Spark of Allah in his hands.

THERE WERE ten men around the long table at the Cordeliers and they watched Henri de Demal as if they were viewing something particularly distasteful. Gardinier, a youthful power in the Commune, glared at him with open contempt, and Danton, at the end of the table, scowled heavily.

"Well, gentlemen," Marat demanded in his hollow tones, "is monsieur to take a seat in the Commune?"

"No," Danton boomed. "There are too many sitters now—that's all anyone does."

"That and order executions!" Gardinier snapped. "Soon there'll be no worry about government because there'll be no people to govern—the guillotine will have claimed them all."

Danton's big body lunged against the edge of the table. "You young fool, if you're hinting at me—"

"Be still." Demal spoke quietly, but his voice rang up and down the length of the table. He leaned forward, and, as his hand tightened on the Spark of Allah, he let his eyes travel from one face to another, slowly and deliberately.

"This is a discussion about the welfare of France."

"So you talk to us—" Danton started up.

But as Demal's eyes touched him he sank down again, a weak whiteness slipping over his face. He brushed his hand across his forehead and sagged in his chair.

Marat bent his death's leer on them. "Then it's settled? Demal goes into the Commune? Those in favor say 'aye.'"

There was a thick silence, but as Demal stirred, ten voices muttered the "aye."

"Good. Now, once Demal also heads the Citizens' Committee, we'll begin operations properly. First, organization. I'll engage a floor at the Hotel des Rivoles where Monsieur Demal now lives and then we'll whip the country into line. All opposition to our plans will be swept aside. Good day, gentlemen."

"Wait." Gardinier plunged to his feet and his shoulders were set, as if he were thrusting them against an

overwhelming pressure. "We must know what you and Demal plan to do once he's on the Commune. You speak of getting rid of opposition—all right, do it! If you wish to save France—save her! It's easy enough, if we'll stop the worst treason the world has ever known. With the Prussian armies storming our borders, our queen—that Marie Antoinette of Austria—betrays us to the enemy! Every move of the French army, every plan, every trick of warfare is known to the Prussians before they're put into effect! Everybody knows the answer—the queen's treachery! She hates France and has always hated it. Now that she can no longer throw away the riches of the people, she betrays us! Send Marie Antoinette to the guillotine. Show you mean to stop opposition!"

Marat, breathing heavily through his mouth, whispered to Demal: "Well?"

"No. Killing one woman is not going to push back the enemy or bring peace to the country. National plans aren't made in a minute, but if you'll all come to my headquarters tomorrow, at the Hotel des Rivoles, I'll have some proposals to make."

He bowed and, turning away, dragged Marat with him out of the building. The little man demanded: "Do you think they'll be there? That was high-handed—as if you were already dictator. Don't forget that's what they all want to be."

He grinned. "They'll be there and now I'm leaving you—"

"But there's a lot to be done."

Demal nodded. "You can take care of it. Go back to the hotel and arrange to rent the floor I live on. See that it's put into shape for administration offices and get the necessary help."

Marat's jaw sagged but Demal moved briskly away. He wanted to walk in the sunshine and look at Paris; wanted to savor the sensation of being once more a man instead of a hunger-sodden thing. It was good to realize that he was dressed in new, decent clothes; to feel clean and alert. He moved swiftly until he reached the Rue Saint Honore, when he slowed down to enjoy his stroll. Seeing that the street was filled with people in highly festive spirits hurrying toward the Place du Carrousel, he followed them. But around the corner, in the *Place*, he halted, for the gay-aired citizens were making for the guillotine which stood there. Demal lifted his eyes to it, tracing the tall black uprights and the crossbars beneath which glistened the sharp, waiting blade. The *Place* was already crowded and women jostled for positions near the "Black Widow," while soldiers struggled to open the way for the tumbrils bringing the condemned to meet their destiny. Neighbors called to each other and men grouped together to discuss the progress of the revolution. Venders began to weave through the crowd and the usual band of sans-culottes tried to snatch their wares while others bought titbits to munch as they waited for the spectacle of death.

"Back, back!" the soldiers shouted and made a narrow path for a tumbril in which sat a shrunken old man with the executioner standing above him, powerful arms akimbo and one hand holding the cord leading from the prisoner's bound wrists. The crowd roared expectantly and tried to get closer as the old man was helped down and led up the steps. The tall young executioner signaled to his assistants and the old man was seized, pushed down to his knees; the lower

part of the round was fixed under his neck. And the crowd fell into unbreathing silence as the executioner jerked the cord which was attached to the blade. The shining knife flashed down. A moaning exhalation escaped from a hundred gaping mouths and the executioner lifted the bleeding head, holding it up by the hair.

"Long live the Republic!" a shrewish voice screamed. Others took it up, turned it into a bellowing chant. Even now, the crowd did not scatter, but pressed closer, for another tumbril was drawing up to the guillotine.

As the soldiers began, once more, to clear the way, the crowd fell expectantly silent and a new sound spun Demal around. Someone was humming contentedly, here, in the presence of death.

He looked through the silent, pressing throng, trying to see each distorted, morbidly flushed face. The sound was growing, but where was it coming from? Others were hearing it, now, and glancing about uneasily. A swarm of sans-culottes was seated at the foot of the Black Widow, some of them knitting, others munching food, but—none of them was humming!

The second tumbril stopped and the condemned man was being helped down, led to the steps. Still that humming— It was now so loud that the brawny young executioner darted a scowling look at the crowd and hustled up the preparations for death.

The victim was pushed forward, hastily, the neckpiece adjusted—and then the humming changed. It was no longer a sound made by a human being, but something coming from the throat of an animal! The rhythmic noise of some gigantic, purring cat!

The crowd began to shift, apprehensively, and Demal, his eyes narrowed, searched furiously for the source of the blood-chilling pur. And then he discovered it. Seated near the foot of the scaffold, among the old sans-culottes, was Lucille Favras! She was dressed in rags and her brilliant head was covered with a filthy shawl. Her shimmering green eyes were looking, not at the scaffold, but up at the mild sky, and it was from her lips that the ghastly sound was breaking. She was purring like a huge cat!

Demal slid his hand into his pocket to find the crystal and, clutching it, stepped forward. A shout went up as the executioner jerked the string which released the blade, but the shout turned into a terrified scream which drowned out the awful purring. The great blade had fallen, but only to stop an inch above the condemned man's neck! And the blade was bending, turning over upon itself!

The executioner stumbled back and his assistants trembled after him. The crowd seemed to choke on its own roar, and with one accord, every man and woman in the place lunged away, clawing and fighting.

Demal tried to see what was happening at the foot of the scaffold, but when the *Place* was finally emptied, there was no one near the guillotine, even the executioner and his assistants having fled. The man below the ax was unconscious, and after a moment, Demal ran up the steps.

"Get out," he said as soon as the prisoner regained consciousness. "This is your chance—get away and hide."

With his eyes distending as if he had gone mad, the man scrambled down the steps and pelted through

the Rue Saint Honore.

Demal examined the big blade which only a few minutes before had claimed a life, and there was no doubt about it. The shining edge was doubled back upon itself.

"It happened while Lucille Favras was humming—purring," he told himself. "Cagliostro's magic is unbelievable. But why should he send one of his creatures to the scaffold to perform this trick? Unless the man was someone he wanted to save, and in that case—"

He whirled toward the Rue Saint Honore, but the street was empty and the last terrified witness had hidden himself behind locked doors.

HENRI DE DEMAL entered the Hotel des Rivoles with the smell of blood in his nostrils and the memory of the guillotine still sharp as acid under his tongue. The people themselves were the answer to the red terror sweeping the land, for although none of them could be sure how long his own neck would remain intact, they reveled like wolves over the letting of blood. Violence had incited the country to such insanity that it had become a game and there was only one answer. The destruction of the Black Widow, the end of wholesale executions.

On the third floor he found workmen swarming through the rooms, but he hurried to his own door, hoping that Marat would not learn of his return. He had to think; had to find the answer of how to control the power given him by the Spark of Allah. It could mean the salvation or the ruin of France. He felt it in his pocket, warm against his flesh, and took it out to look at it; to see that it glowed like a great blue eye.

He prowled to the window and pulled aside the curtains, although he saw nothing before him, for he was visualizing the grim outline of the guillotine, feeling the savage blood lust of the ghouls gathered about it.

A knock aroused him, and then a hotel servant entered. "Pardon, but Monsieur Marat told me that I must be sure to deliver this message. He has made all arrangements and, although he was called away, will be here in two hours."

Demal nodded and turned back to the window, but a moment later someone again fumbled with the door. "If you've any more messages to leave, don't!" he snapped.

A low laugh answered him. A woman's laugh, which was like the faint sound of swung bells. And he knew, before he faced her, that Lucille Favras was in the room.

"Monsieur," she smiled, and Demal's fingers clenched on the Spark of Allah.

This was not the ragged girl he had seen sitting at the foot of the scaffold. This was a woman dressed with costly fashionableness. Her golden hair gleamed under a smart and absurd hat; her costume was rich and beautifully made; jewels flashed at her throat.

"How did you get in here? There are men outside to look after my privacy."

Her smile widened and her beauty seemed to light the whole room. "Would you stop me if you were—one of those men?"

He hesitated and his eyes narrowed against the brilliance of hers; the look of a watchful eagle touched his aristocratic face. "No, madame. I wouldn't stop you—I couldn't. Won't you sit down?"

She nodded and dropped into a chair facing him. "You want to know why I came."

"I know already."

Her laugh sounded once more, and he thought of perfume drifting through a black night. "You're wrong. I didn't come hoping to get the Spark of Allah because I know you'll never give it up—willingly."

"But perhaps I may *have* to give it up unwillingly?"

She nodded. "You're dreaming dreams just now. The crystal does that to anyone who touches it. Yours are good dreams, too, but—they won't work out, monsieur. Nothing can help France except time."

Demal sat down. "Cagliostro could make anyone believe in his powers if he can give a woman beauty such as yours and control her as his puppet."

Her face quieted, turned still as marble. Then she lifted her hands abruptly and the surface of her face broke into a sneer. "Cagliostro! A charlatan!"

Demal grinned. "I wouldn't say that—"

"I would. For instance, he's sending for you. Suddenly, he finds that he absolutely must talk to you, for he now realizes you have the Spark of Allah. Don't go to see him."

"Why shouldn't I? I've a couple of things to talk over with Cagliostro—one being that France can do without him."

The girl smiled. "There's no reason to tell him that, considering how easily the guillotine is functioning these days."

"But suppose someone started purring when he was under the blade—purring like a great cat? Wouldn't that—"

She sprang to her feet. "That's not true! I didn't pur! If I hummed, it was because I'd forgotten where I was and was feeling a moment of peace. You—"

A SOFT, deferential knock cut off her words, and when Demal called out, the servant reappeared, bearing an envelope. "A boy brought this, monsieur. He said it was important and I thought—"

Demal took it and the servant fumbled back to the door, moving sidewise, like a crab, in order to keep his gaze on the glowing beauty of Lucille Favras. "It's from Cagliostro," she said when the door had finally closed.

"Yes. He asks me to come on a matter of great urgency."

Her smile spread slowly and Demal wondered if he were imagining the dazzling quality of her loveliness.

"Don't go. The only urgency he knows is some scheme of his own. Perhaps he's thought of a way to get the crystal from you."

"Why should you want to prevent that? Does it make any difference to you which of us has it?"

Lucille nodded. "A great deal. In the wrong hands—it would be ever more terrible for me than it is now."

He took a stride toward her but halted sharply. "Tell me why you feel you must have the crystal. Why it's so important to you."

Her shimmering eyes narrowed and her chiseled lips moved, but then she shook her head. "Some day, perhaps. But you'll be safer not to see Count di Cagliostro."

"Sorry, but I'm leaving at once. Right now, if you'll excuse me."

She got up with the gliding movement of a great cat; such a cat as might pur at the foot of a scaffold. "No, I won't excuse you, but I'll go, too—not actually into his house. I'll just drive out with you."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps I'll enjoy the ride or perhaps—it would be safer."

He met her eyes and, after a mo-

ment, nodded. "You can ride with me if you wish. In fact, I'll be happy to have you."

There was no reason for him to be afraid of her so long as he held the Spark of Allah, and he might discover why she was pretending to warn him against the magician. Did Cagliostro believe he could be so easily thrown off guard and give the girl a chance to get at the crystal?

"You don't mind my going with you?"

"No," he said, and meant it, although he had seen her destroy men by the touch of her green glance.

When they emerged from the hotel, a doorman hastily summoned a carriage and Demal directed the driver to take them to the Avenue de Kleber.

"Now," he told the girl, "let's forget why we're together and pretend we're merely enjoying a drive through the city."

"I have forgotten," she said softly. "I'm only a woman who's in love with life and talking to a most attractive man. You are that, monsieur. A man such as would appeal to any woman."

"If I tried to describe your charm, I'd fail," he murmured, looking down into her face and not letting himself touch her. "You're not real."

She sat up and her eyes were gold-pointed as they jabbed at him. "Not real? Why? What—"

The carriage stopped and the driver said: "The Avenue de Kleber, sir. Any particular number?"

"No." Demal got out, hastily. "Wait here for me."

Lucille said quickly: "I'll wait, too. Remember what I told you."

When Demal crossed the little garden of No. 10, Cagliostro himself opened the door. "You came!" he said. "Good, good! Come this way, to my study."

Tonight there were no veiled women waiting for some unknown thing, but the empty rooms were oppressive, as if crowded with unseen strivings. Turning aside from the "office," the magician led the way into a shabbily comfortable den and pushed out a chair.

"We'll have a liqueur while we talk." He went to a cabinet buffet and poured brandy from an age-incrusted bottle, but his hands were unsteady and bloodless. His fleshy face was a mottled gray and the roll of fat beneath his chin had diminished.

Demal accepted the glass as the magician murmured, "To all good things," but merely touched the brandy to his lips.

"Now, you want to know the reason for my message. Monsieur, I've already heard much of you—everyone's talking. Although you were unknown a few hours ago, you have become the man who will save France, so I owe you all the protection I can give you."

"Protection?"

"Precisely." Cagliostro put down his glass and some of the liquid slopped over the edge. "The crystal in your possession brings great power, but also great danger."

Demal smiled. "You're speaking of the Spark of Allah, but you told me that you knew nothing of it—had never heard of it."

Cagliostro waved an impatient hand. "One doesn't talk unless sure of the listener."

"Then you did give the crystal to Marie Antoinette."

"No—or, at least, not as you think. I gave it to her as the Spark of Allah, but didn't believe it actually was. She had heard through her court of an all-powerful stone

and said that she would pay anything for it. After having several audiences at Versailles, I presented her with this crystal, but at the time I had no idea—"

"—that it actually was the Spark of Allah?" Demal laughed and the magician's face turned darker gray.

He half shouted: "Yes, yes, if you must have the truth! How could I know that the Spark of Allah would be found in an ordinary bank box?"

"Maybe you'd better tell me about that, count," Demal murmured.

"During the first upsurge of the revolutionary movement, certain people were suspected of instigating trouble and an order was given for the seizure of all their papers, which meant that any strong boxes or bank safety boxes had to be opened. The officer in charge of the soldiers who carried out the order was a friend of mine and I accompanied him to the banks out of curiosity. The soldiers broke open all boxes, not just those of the suspected persons, and we examined their contents. In one of them, I saw this crystal ball, which was a pretty thing that I could use. I took it along, with the officer's consent, and later presented it to the queen."

"And now?"

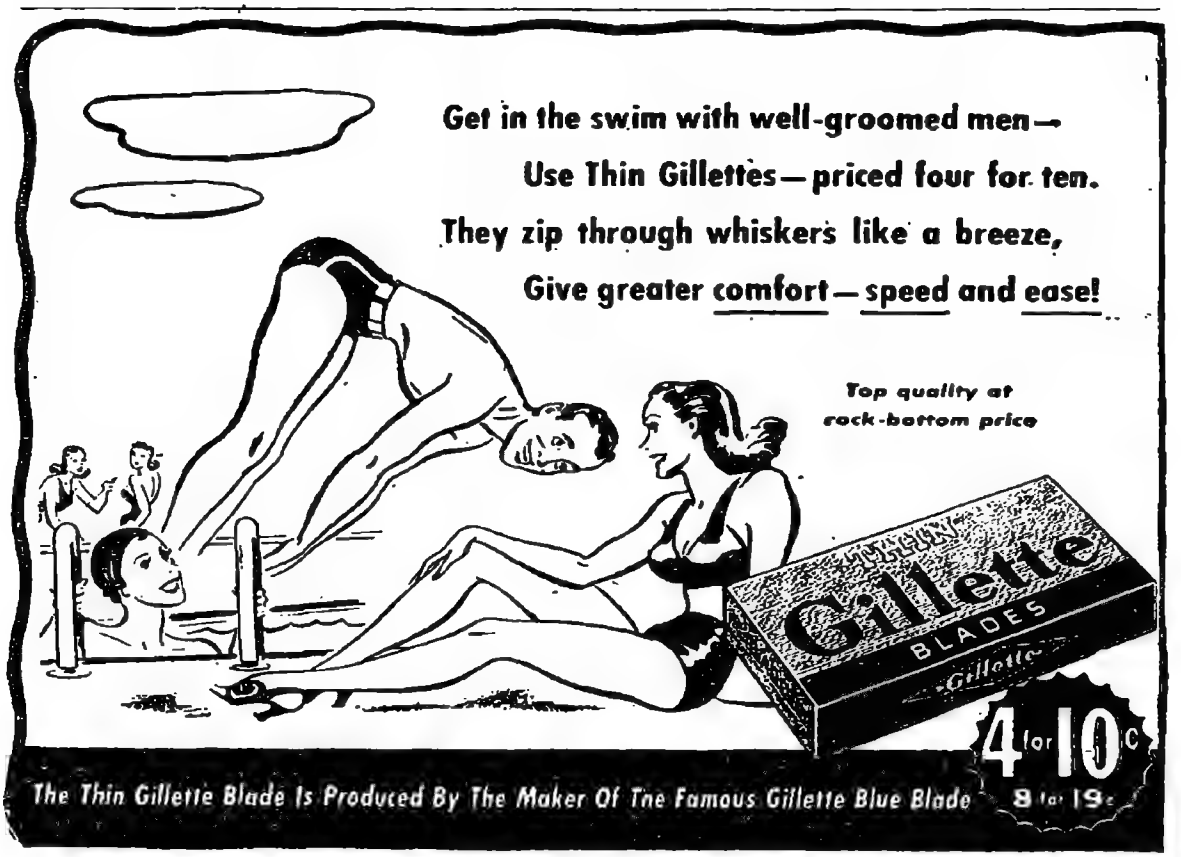
Cagliostro stopped short, staring blankly as he repeated, "And now?"

"You have some reason for telling me all this."

"Yes, oh, yes. Now that I realize the crystal actually is the Spark of Allah and know it's in your possession, I must tell you its history and meaning: You're in real danger, monsieur—greater danger than any man in the shadow of the guillotine."

"Because of the crystal?"

The magician did not appear to hear him. "Don't smile at what I'm about to tell you—because you'll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wish you hadn't. Have you ever heard the Legend of Lilith?"

"Lilith— The witch, you mean? The mother of Eve?"

He shook his head. "She was not the mother of Eve, but the first wife of Adam. She was actually the first woman, but after marrying Adam, she left him, and in punishment, was condemned to live forever. She is young and beautiful, although she has been living since the dawn of time—many people believe she existed for centuries before Adam. Sometimes, she takes on certain definite human forms and she has influenced every period of history. She was an oracle with the earliest Jewish tribes. She lived as Cleopatra and as Helen of Troy. It's also known that she was Salome, and later Lucretia Borgia. Some say that she sat upon the throne of England for many years, and others believe that right now she is living in France as—Marie Antoinette."

"Marie Antoinette!"

Cagliostro laughed mirthlessly. "That's just stupid gossip because Lilith has never been conquered or behaved witlessly. If the poor queen were really Lilith, there'd be no revolution. Wait"—as Demal tried to speak—"I haven't finished. There was a boon granted to her at the time she was condemned to eternity and that was beauty such as no earthly woman could rival. To retain this loveliness, she also needs youth, so each hundred years she steps into the blue fire, like the salamander, and emerges renewed and young."

He paused, and in the waiting silence, his breath rasped. "That explains the Spark of Allah. The renewing fire can be kindled—the blue fire—only by the crystal. It draws the very lightning from the sky, and without the crystal she would crumple into horrible and repulsive age. There are papers and writings on the Spark of Allah, which I only partially believed when I studied them. They tell of the power bestowed upon anyone possessing the crystal which might better be called Lava from Hell."

"Then the crystal is hers! But how did you find it in a bank's strong box? Don't tell me that the witch, Lilith, older than time itself, strolled into a bank and engaged a box!"

Cagliostro eyed him. "Yes, that's just what I'm telling you, monsieur. A young and beautiful woman engaged the box. I found out, later, that it had been rented by a Madame Lucille Favras. Lilith."

Demal's feet pushed against the floor and shot him up from the chair. Lucille. Lilith. Then she was not an automaton controlled by the man before him. Not a will-less thing carrying out his orders, but the oldest, most destructive spirit in the world, struggling desperately to regain what was rightfully hers!

Her eyes had dealt death and her throat had become the instrument of a cat's song while she witnessed death. He heard his own voice, coming from a distance.

"I think I believe you— But it's impossible! Old women invent stories of the sort to frighten each other!"

Cagliostro smiled grimly. "You know better, because you've plenty of reason to understand that Lilith is not mere imagination. You know, too, what the crystal has done for you within a few hours."

"You seem to have learned a lot about me."

"I have. Everything. But don't talk yourself into a mistake about Lilith or Madame Favras."

Demal nodded, but the gesture was only to himself. Lucille. Lilith. In the future, even with the crystal in his hand, he would keep plenty of distance between them, and there might be some way—

He realized Cagliostro was watching him and that there was cunning in the shallow, narrow eyes. He picked up his glass. "To Lilith, then, and to woman."

The other man's gaze sharpened, but he drank, and Demal said thoughtfully: "You had some reason for warning me. You want something for yourself, Count di Cagliostro."

"Yes. But it's not hard to give. As you know, I'm not supposed to be in France now. I'm not supposed to be anywhere and, as I'm growing older, I'd like some security and peace."

"Meaning?"

He waved an expansive hand. "You are coming into power, into a position which may change the destiny of a nation—and I'm your friend."

"I see. You want my promise that you'll not be driven from the country, annoyed or bothered in any way."

"That's right, monsieur. It's little to ask."

Demal put out his hand. "There's my promise of protection, so long as I can give it."

He released the other's wettish hand and turned toward the door, but then he paused. "When I slept here, in your house, I was awakened by a tiny creature, no bigger than my hand. Did I really see her or was she an illusion?"

Cagliostro hesitated. "You saw her. That's my sylphid. Perhaps—"

"I'd like to see her again unless it's too inconvenient."

"Not at all. We'll go into this room—" He crossed to a door and waited for Demal to enter a bright, gay place where flowers stood on many tables and pleasant paintings decorated the wall. "Here she is, monsier."

He lifted down a white box and opened the lid. Inside the glass-topped box was the tiny creature who had searched his clothing for the crystal. She was sleeping in a miniature bed, her little face flushed and her hair tumbled.

"It isn't possible," Demal mumbled.

"But you see for yourself. There, touch her—no, it won't frighten her as long as I am here. She's really my masterpiece, my little Isabella."

THE SYLPHID was awake now, her eyes round with terror as she crouched away from them into a corner of her bed. The count laughed. "She plays games, monsieur, see—"

"If that's what you call a game, Cagliostro!"

The bell-like words came from the door behind them—and Demal, even with his hand on the Spark of Allah, felt ice in his spine. Lucille Favras stood there—lighting the space around her with beauty too great for mortality. Her head was lifted and she seemed very tall, but her eyes were on the magician; emerald-green over which yellow fire shimmered.

Slowly, she took a step forward, holding his gaze. He moved back and retreated again when she took another step. His tall body seemed to be breaking in half-so that he scuttled away from her like an awkwardly bounding rabbit.

"Stand where you are!" Her words whipped after him and he jolted to a stop, although he did not straighten his queerly bent back.

"I . . . I was showing my sylphid to Monsieur de Demal, a friend of yours—"

"Be still and don't move."

Her eyes released him and he sagged against the wall, to slide down to the floor, where he slumped helplessly although still completely conscious.

Lucille looked up at Demal, but the Spark of Allah was warming his hand and he waited almost calmly. She nodded at him. "I know. You're sure of yourself and you've a right to be. I want to tell you about our Count di Cagliostro—a pretty name he picked for himself, too.

"This"—she gestured toward the satin-lined box where the sylphid crouched on the tiny bed—"is Isabella Chalons, one of the greatest of Austrian beauties, who, while she was appearing at the Paris Theater, refused our charming count's attentions. So—here's his answer. She is more hopelessly his prisoner than iron shackles could make her."

Demal tore his eyes from the green shimmer. "That's a woman, then? A woman whom he—"

"Even frauds have their tricks, and he's developed a few good ones. Isabella Chalons is—or was—a normal woman, but she has been like this for two years, while Cagliostro gloats."

A strangled, unintelligible sound came from the magician, but she ignored it. "I think you believe he's a great sorcerer! He's not—I'll prove that to you. It will require something more potent than his black magic to restore that little thing to her normal size. Well, I'll do it for you."

Cagliostro screamed: "In the name of God, you can't. Not now. It'll be murder. The shock will kill her—I've thought of trying to turn her back lots of times—I've wanted to, but I was afraid. The strain on her heart and vital organs would be fatal!"

"Be still," Lucille snapped. "And—you, Monsieur Demal, stand aside, out of my way."

She bent over the box, lifted out the sylphid and carried her to a couch, where she placed her in a reclining position on a pillow. "Now, my little one, you are to sleep," she said in a voice which was lower than a whisper, which was actually no sound at all, but was remembered as a silent impression on the senses.

Holding the sylphid on the cushion, she lifted the hand bearing the great emerald ring and held it over the little creature's face. Its struggles stopped and it lay limp and inert, apparently lifeless. Lucille got to her feet, still holding out the emerald.

And Demal, watching her, felt his flesh shudder; knew once more the sensation of his bones being torn away. Somehow, he had to stop Lucille Favras; for some reason, he knew she was about to do a damnable thing—

"Stop," he shouted. "Leave her alone—"

But he had only thought to shout. Although his mouth opened and his throat worked, no sound broke the stillness of the room. His hand was clenched on the crystal, but in spite of it, Lucille Favras seemed able to go on with the black ritual! If that were true—

THE SYLPHID was writhing on the cushion, writhing and moaning, its arms stretching out in gestures of agony, while the great emerald sent a ray of light down onto the tiny body. Tiny—wasn't it larger than it had been a moment before? Were the writhing, pain-threshing legs

longer, growing longer before Demal's eyes?

He felt sweat form on his forehead; roll down into his eyebrows. He tried to move, but his feet were fastened to the floor. A queer, gasping noise was coming from Cagliostro and he turned, with an effort, to look at him. The magician was lying flat, foaming at the mouth.

"See—" Lucille Favras spoke. "See—it is happening."

Yes. The tortured, suffering thing on the couch was now as large as a two-year-old child. But every bit of its face, every hair on its head, every terrible movement told of unbearable agony. Demal planted his feet, as he had on the first day he met Lucille Favras, and stared at the floor. Tiny cries, like those of a baby, were issuing from the couch now, but he would not look. Nor would he ever forget the suffering.

The woman was speaking again, her tones crooning. Woman? Lucille Favras? Or Lilith, the witch, who, even without her Spark of Allah, could reduce the world's most famous sorcerer to gibbering idiocy. And he had believed Cagliostro to be her master!

If he left now—she couldn't stop him. With the crystal on him, he could surely summon enough strength to get out of the room and away from her. But he glanced at the couch again, and, where the sylphid had been, saw a very young girl. A girl just touched with the bloom of life. He looked away, tasting the salty sweat gathering on his lips as it poured down his face. The girl was sobbing dreadfully, but then the sobs stopped and he saw that she was unconscious. Older now, in appearance. Some years older. In fact, she was a young woman of exceptional beauty!

Lucille Favras stepped back from

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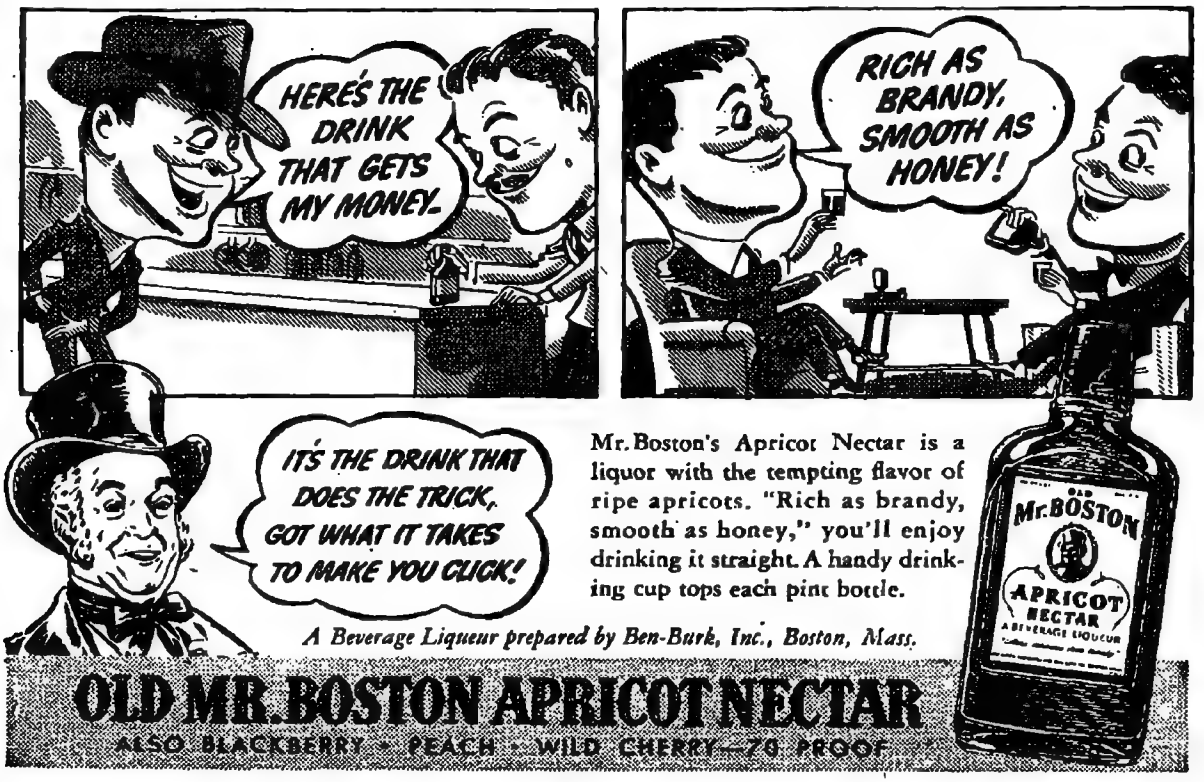
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the couch. "She'll awaken soon."

He rubbed his wet face. "It was horrible!"

"More horrible than remaining as she was? A pitiful plaything for Cagliostro?"

She turned on the magician, who was a grotesque heap of flesh and clothing lying on the floor. Disdainfully, she bent and touched him, seeming to force him up, onto his feet; by that light contact of her fingers. He stood, swaying and blank-eyed, before her.

"You sent for Monsieur Demal to tell him about the crystal and warn him against Lilith. So France is no longer the place for you and you're to be out of it before dark tomorrow. Understand?"

He managed to nod, although his head was rolling on his shoulders like a ball held by a loose string.

"I'm letting you go—for reasons of my own. But you won't get another chance. Also, I want to give you something pleasant to think about. When you leave France, you'll wander back to Italy and there you'll spend what remains of your life in prison. Good night, my dear count!"

She started out so swiftly that she seemed about to run, and Demal put out his hand to stop her. But, instantly, he dropped it again. And then, as the door closed, Cagliostro slumped to the floor and a shuddering sob came from the couch.

THE GIRL, Isabella, sat up, blue eyes huge in her frightened face, and seeing Cagliostro, she screamed in terror. Springing to her feet, she cowered away from the unconscious magician.

"It's all right, mademoiselle," Demal told her. "You're safe—now."

Her frightened glance jumped to him, as if seeing him for the first time. "Safe?" she cried. "There's Count di Cagliostro, who's kept me here, who's—" Her words broke and she covered her face with her hands.

"But look at him. He can't harm you any longer."

The hands pressed to her face shook uncontrollably, but she finally lowered them, squeezing them into fists. "You don't know, monsieur. He can do anything. He can rob the body of its soul. He can turn one into . into—" She stopped again, gasping new fear shadowing her. "But who are you?"

"Henri de Demal," he said.

"You are—"

"Not a friend of Cagliostro's."

She sat down on the edge of the couch, helpless hands drooping onto her lap. "How did it happen? I can't tell you how long I've been here as a a puppet of his. At times I was sure I'd gone mad and was seeing the world and everyone in it as thousands of times their natural size. Now, everything is normal again. Something happened to me—something he made happen!"

"Yes." Demal went to her and, sitting beside her, covered the fragile hands with his own. "But it'll be better not to talk about it just now. I'll take you wherever you wish to go—to your home or friends."

"Home . friends—" she murmured and frowned. "I've been here so long and my home isn't in Paris. Why, I'm not even sure of when I came to France. There was a dancing engagement and then the count took—"

"Try not to think of that part. You'll have to decide where you want to go."

She got up, almost leaping to her feet. "It doesn't matter where I go, so long as I get out of this house now—before he awakens! After

that, I'll decide what to do."

"Wait." He drew her arm through his. "Don't worry about his awakening; I'll see that he doesn't bother you. But you can't just walk out of here and believe everything to be settled. How will you live?"

"Why—" She looked at him with a faint smile. "I shall go home, back to Vienna, of course."

"You can't, mademoiselle. You're an Austrian and your country is at war with France—which means that you're an enemy alien."

"War—" The color ran out of her cheeks and she sank back to the couch, her arm sliding from his. "War? Between France and Austria? Then— But when I came here—"

"You've been here two years, mademoiselle, without knowing anything of what was happening around you. France is having a revolution and a war at the same time."

Fear shot into her eyes and her lips shook against each other. "Then what will I do? Maybe it would have been better to have stayed as I was—died that way! Perhaps—"

"No." He drew her gently up to her feet. "I'll see that you're safe for the time being, and later we can work out means of getting you to your own country."

"But if I'm an enemy alien and I'm discovered trying to leave, it will mean prison, at least."

"Not with me. Now, stop worrying. I've a carriage waiting, so let's get started."

But still she hesitated, her eyes dark and questioning. "Where will you take me, monsieur?"

"Well—" It was his turn to be uncertain. "First, we'll go to my hotel and find quarters for you. After that you'll need a long rest. We'll work everything out, and the only thing I ask is—"

"Yes?" Her glance grew even more watchful.

"—that you try to trust me."

She did not speak for all of a second, but then the shadowy fear left her face and she smiled, dimples flashing. "I'm sure I can, monsieur —and thank you."

At the Hotel des Rivoles, where the foyer was unusually crowded, every eye became fixed on Isabella. As Demal moved toward the desk to engage a room for her, highly personal glances traveled over the girl and then moved to him. The clerk smiled understandingly.

Demal heeled sharply about and told her: "We can attend to the formalities later. I've a whole floor at my disposal so there's sure to be room for you."

But on the third floor he discovered that there was just one room which she could possibly use, a small chamber next to his own, for everything else had been turned into offices. A reception clerk was already installed and so were various secretaries and miscellaneous workers. Marat had certainly moved fast.

He stood undecidedly in the doorway of the smaller bedroom, and Isabella, glancing past him, stepped over the threshold, saying: "This is very nice. I'll feel safe here, too, so close to you."

"But it's so small. Wait and I'll have my things moved in here so that you can take my larger room."

"No, oh, no, monsieur. This is fine and I simply won't let you give up your room. That would make me feel too—demanding."

"Yes, well—then if you're sure you'll be comfortable—"

He went hastily to his own room, where he dropped heavily into a chair. How had it happened? Of

course, Isabella was a delightful creature, but he had not counted on taking any girl, no matter how charming, into his home. There was no time for such complications and right now he should be conferring with Marat, discovering whether he had been seated on the Commune or elected to the Citizens' Committee. He had promised a plan of action and as yet had nothing to offer. Still, he could have done nothing else about the girl. Someone had to look after her when she was suddenly and helplessly caught between the powers of magic and warfare.

Clenching his hand over the crystal in a gesture which was fixing into a habit, he pulled himself out of the chair, and the door creaked slowly open. Isabella looked in at him, saying: "Please don't get up. I thought—perhaps we could talk."

She seemed forlorn and fragile. She was probably frightened at being alone. "Certainly. Come in!"

When he remained standing she shook her head reprovingly and sat down on a low bench beside his chair. "I don't want to trouble you or be—an annoyance."

"You couldn't be that." He laughed. "Isabella, you don't seem to realize—"

But he broke off, doubting the wisdom of making her understand that no lovely woman need offer apologies for her presence. "We'll have dinner brought up soon. It'll be better for you not to be seen in the public dining rooms."

"Yes." She nodded seriously. "Shall I send for the waiter?"

"I'll do it in a moment."

She smiled. The light was soft on her dark hair and there was trust in her eyes.

Almost involuntarily, his hand went out to touch her smooth head. Her hair was pleasantly warm under his hand and he saw the flash of her dimples. But then she sprang up, with a choked cry. The door had swung open.

Standing on the threshold was Marat, his yellow face leering beneath the soiled kerchief tied about his head. "Sorry—" he mumbled. "I didn't know."

"You know better than to enter without knocking!"

"Of course." He came in, his hands rubbing together. "I knocked, but apparently you didn't hear, so I came in anyhow. It's important, most important—"

Demal shook his head, and his fingers, in that automatic gesture, found the crystal which he had carefully changed into the pocket of his robe. "Not that important."

Isabella said softly, "I'll go now, monsieur."

"Well," Marat chuckled, looking after her, "that's a morsel I haven't seen in Paris for a long time. Mademoiselle Chalons. Where did you find her?"

Demal's eyes narrowed and he looked down at the other man. "Where I found her concerns only me and I don't want it known that she's here."

"Of course, of course. But I've been waiting for you, man. Have you forgotten—"

"No. Is the seat on the Commune arranged?"

"Yes, yes, everything is arranged. Tomorrow, the important members of the Commune and the Citizens' Committee will come here for a talk with you. That's one reason we must have a discussion now—there are things to be gone over."

Demal nodded. "Sit down."

Marat poised himself on the very edge of the chair and thrust out his head, talking so rapidly that the

ends of the kerchief waggled under his chin. "The strong men on the Commune want action. They know that if the people don't get it soon, they'll find someone who'll give it to them."

"What does that mean?"

Marat's lips made a crooked design against his yellow face. "Monsieur, what do you think? Have you forgotten there's an enemy army at our border? That the revolution at home sways first one way and then another? The people need to be reassured, to know that they have the right men leading them."

"How do you want to reassure them?"

"Well." His head strained even farther forward. "There's news of a fresh defeat at the front and everyone's restless, shouting the nation's been betrayed, that we're harboring dangerous political prisoners—not to mention Marie Antoinette."

"Who are these dangerous politician prisoners?"

"Who? The jails are full of them—every day active enemies of France are sentenced for the protection of the people."

"Oh, and you want action against the imprisoned men? Speedy trials?"

"No. We want the country to know that it's forever safe from these enemies. If, say, tomorrow night, the prisons were attacked by mobs—who would later prove to be outraged citizens—then the people will believe in their leaders."

Shock traveled along Demal's nerves and he stared into the eyes of the other man with his hand clenching the glass ball. "You want to order—or allow—the murder of every person in prison, even those awaiting trial!" He, too, leaned forward. "No," he said softly. "No. There'll be no prison massacres."

"But you can't play soft in times like these! The people want action and—"

"They want blood, you mean.

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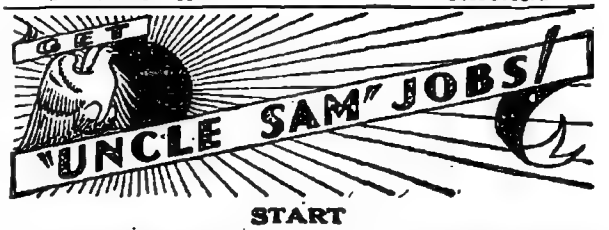

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They're being taught to want it. The answer is still no, and be sure that I don't hear of any accidents overtaking prisoners. Good day, Monsieur Marat."

The little man edged off his chair, but his eyes flickered away from Demal and he almost jumped for the door.

"Remember what I said."

"Of course, certainly. I'll transmit your—orders at once."

"Send in one of those assistants you got for me. The brightest one."

WITH MARAT gone, Demal realized that the room suddenly seemed dark, as if gloom were gathering prematurely. There was a patch of shadows beyond the windows. It was stirring, taking on the outlines of a woman. Of Lucille Favras, who was Lilith—

But then he saw that there was, actually, only the shadows of late afternoon before him, and got angrily to his feet. Why must he feel as if Lucille were always near, waiting—waiting to reach him with her deadly glance?

A hand struck the door and he stiffened, bracing himself to hear her voice when he called, "Come in."

But it was a tall, thin, high-shouldered man from the newly organized office. "I'm Peilmande, sir, your chief assistant."

"Come in and sit down." Demal glanced toward the windows again, but there was only an ordinary blob of shadows on the wall. Peilmande was watching him with a quiet thoughtfulness and he realized that the man's eyes were green. Not the shade of molten emeralds, but still definitely green.

Demal sank back into his chair and deliberately met Peilmande's gaze. "Is General Lafayette in Paris?"

"No, sir."

"I thought he spent much of his time here."

Peilmande shook his head. "There's a war, sir, and the general seems to be pretty busy with it."

"Who would be his Paris aide?"

"Commandant Josef Germaine."

"Send him a message asking him to call on me tomorrow."

The clerk nodded and waited.

"I need an emissary, too," Demal murmured, as if to himself. "What happened to Count Artoland, who was our most brilliant diplomat a few years ago?"

"He's living in retirement on his farm a few miles from Paris."

"Then write and ask him to come here. That's all, now, I think."

"Yes, sir." Peilmande went quietly to the door, turned and inclined his head. Then he was gone, soundlessly, and Demal scowled after him. Where had Marat found the man, anyhow? Perhaps he, himself, had better give some time to appointing associates and assistants. Marat was too completely lost in the dream of building a government from blood which never stopped flowing.

"Monsieur." The lifted, clear voice came from beyond the door, and he crossed the room to find Isabella smiling apologetically. "I knocked but you didn't hear. Will you have dinner now?"

Behind her were two stalwart waiters carrying a beautifully equipped table. At his nod, they entered, put it down before the fireplace, lighted the candles, and placed the soup.

"There. Isn't that pleasant?"

He grew aware of the eagerness of her eyes and the prettiness of her face. "Yes, very nice, and even nicer to have such a charming dinner companion."

She flushed attractively. "Thank you, monsieur."

"That," he murmured, as he held her chair, "was not just a compliment, Isabella. You grow more charming each moment—or rather, I become more aware of the charm."

Her smile flickered and the candlelight fell across her young face. The dinner was long and absorbing. And, watching the movement of her slim hands, Demal could not remember a pleasanter meal or a more enjoyable hour. Strange, how the girl had been almost created from nothing to become part of his life—

He bent toward her, across the table. "We seem to be strangely fated, don't we? As if this were meant to be, as though you and I had to meet."

She nodded, slowly, her face serious and quiet. Her hands lifted a little and then dropped. The light was even softer as it fell over her smooth head. But what had moved—just out of his line of vision? Something had stirred in the shadows— He pushed back his chair and got up, trying to see through the gloom beyond the candle glow.

"Isabella"—he turned to the table and avoided her glance—"if you don't mind— I just remembered a certain matter— I'd like to be— If you'll excuse me for a few moments—"

"W-why, of course, monsieur." Her face flamed and she hurried from the room while Demal waited for what might be forming itself in the dusky corner. But there was nothing which light would not dispel, and he finally pulled a chair up to the table, wishing that he had not sent Isabella Chalons away.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

Next month's Unknown will be out one week earlier—August 2nd.

The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

Review of the year.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

The appearance of the February Unknown will doubtless be the signal for many letters—most of them emphatic in their likes and dogmatic in their dislikes—nevertheless I shall write, if only for the official wastebasket. I might say in starting that I first read science-fiction in the old *Electrical Experimenter* and have continued to do so off and on since, but not until the past fall have I enjoyed such a magazine consistently enough to want to subscribe—I now get both Unknown and *Astounding*.

As to the facts in the case: The twelve Unknowns have carried some twenty-five long or semi-long stories. I rate six excellent, seven good and eleven readable. (I try to be conservative at both ends, but this is a much better record than that shown by any one of the several general magazines I read.) I enjoyed "Divide and Rule" the most, with "The Elder Gods" a close second. Stuart's story is probably the best written fantasy tale that I have had the pleasure of reading, but it takes De Camp to add just the right amount of things humorous. Hubbard's were good, with "Slaves of Sleep" the best. I did not particularly like "Flame Winds" and its sequel—perhaps because they left a little too much to the imagination—while the only novel I definitely disliked was "Returned from Hell." It was just typical pulp.

The forty-one short stories are a little harder to classify, but I list eleven as excellent, fifteen as good and eight as just readable. A definite choice is impossible, but those by Del Rey, De Camp, Gold and Guernsey were usually good, while my pet peeves include Mona Farnsworth and Dorothy Quick.

The articles were the poorest part of the first year's Unknown. I realize that an article suitable for a fantasy magazine is a difficult assignment for anyone, and apparently you agree because articles have been few. Willy Ley's last would make most mathematicians see red. Certainly he is the first I have heard call "two" a series.

The illustrations for the most part were good, but the artists should read the author's description of the illustree. For example, the October cover did not agree with the inside illustrations at all. Some of your covers are so farfetched that a byline on the title page telling the "why for" is needed. Then, too, the illustrations should not be placed so as to anticipate the plot. The last drawing for the February installment of "On the Knees of the Gods" apparently carries over to the March issue.

I like Cartier, but even his heroes must be on J. Edgar's public enemy list.

Now a few words of advice (of course I could write better stories and edit a better magazine, but I just can't be bothered) from one who moved up from a secondhand shop browser to a newsstand buyer to a subscriber: Don't get too morbid—virtually the entire February issue was morbid with a sadistic touch; a little humor is needed, always. Don't take yourself too seriously even if the Mugwumps from Mars are coming every second Friday. Second, sequels should be identified with names, dates and summaries of that which they succeed. (This applies more to *Astounding*, but as Unknown ages, it will fill the bill also.)

And last, as this is a political year, I would suggest that you get in touch with Tom Dewey and see if the Republicans haven't a solution for the four things troubling this world, i.e., the Vitons (March), the Jinni (July), Lucifer (September) and the Accident Prones (February). On second thought maybe the Democrats could blame the partial failure of the New Deal on these four instead of themselves. Anyway there at least ought to be a law, so let us all write our congressmen.—E. P. Pope, Woolsey, Georgia.

Remember—accident prones are not Hubbard's invention; they do exist!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Following are some observations on the February issue of Unknown Fantasy Fiction, which issue is worth observing, though not as good as some issues I have read in the past. The novel, "Death's Deputy," by L. Ron Hubbard, was very good and very different. I don't recall ever having read any story that dealt with that particular subject. Those "accident prones" must be nice people to have around—like heck! Cartier's illustrations for this story were satisfactory; the cover was very striking.

Short stories: "Call of Duty" and "The Psychomorph" were average. "When It Was Moonlight" turned out to be a refreshing little yarn. It seems Mr. Poe knew how to handle vampires in addition to being a prolific author. Our Arabian legend for this month, "The Wisdom of an Ass," was enjoyable. Finlay's drawings were excellent; the best in the issue, in fact. The serial, "On the Knees of the Gods," is coming right along. All of the serials that have appeared in Unknown so far, and most of

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the shorter stories, can truthfully be called the cream of fantasy-fiction. I am looking forward to some great stories during your second year.—George M. Aylesworth, Box 508, Mackinaw City, Michigan.

Legends of Cape Cod wanted.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Having just finished the February Unknown, am more or less tempted to add my voice to the faithful flock of followers, in highest praise. Perhaps "Death's Deputy" wasn't all it might have been, but even the less important stories in Unknown are really quite good.

I have been more or less interested for some time in the Indian and Norse Legends of Cape Cod, the "Narrow Land"; and somehow the idea comes to mind that such a subject as is presented in some one of those old tales might well be worked up for Unknown. Not by myself—though I'd like to be capable of it—but by some one of your better authors—perhaps De Camp, or the lad to whom I often refer in glowing terms, the author of March's novel, Jack Williamson.

As for Unknown itself, congratulations constant and sincere. From Russell—whose "Sinister Barrier" I shall never forget—to De Camp—whose last yarn should be preserved in letters of gold in a diamond-studded copy of the mag—and from Cartier to Isip, the layout is glori us. Thus, my sentiments.

Incidentally, if this sees the printed page, I should like to hear from anyone who can give me a bit of information on those legends of Maushop and the Narrow Land—or perchance persons who know the surrounding area of Cape Cod, particularly our island of Martha's Vineyard—Allan Keniston, Jr., Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts.

Re: Fantasy and vegetables in the March Unknown.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Anent the March issue: it would be just perfect, if your contributors, all of whom know their P's and Q's in the realm of fantasy, also knew their garden bulbs and vegetables. Reference being made to "The Living Ghost" by E. A. Grosser on pp. 94 and 95, the story permitting carrots to grow ahead of barely sprouting tulips and narcissuses. Even way down South poetic license cannot reverse the seasons, can it now?—Ernest M. Smola, 70 St. Marks Place, New York, N. Y.

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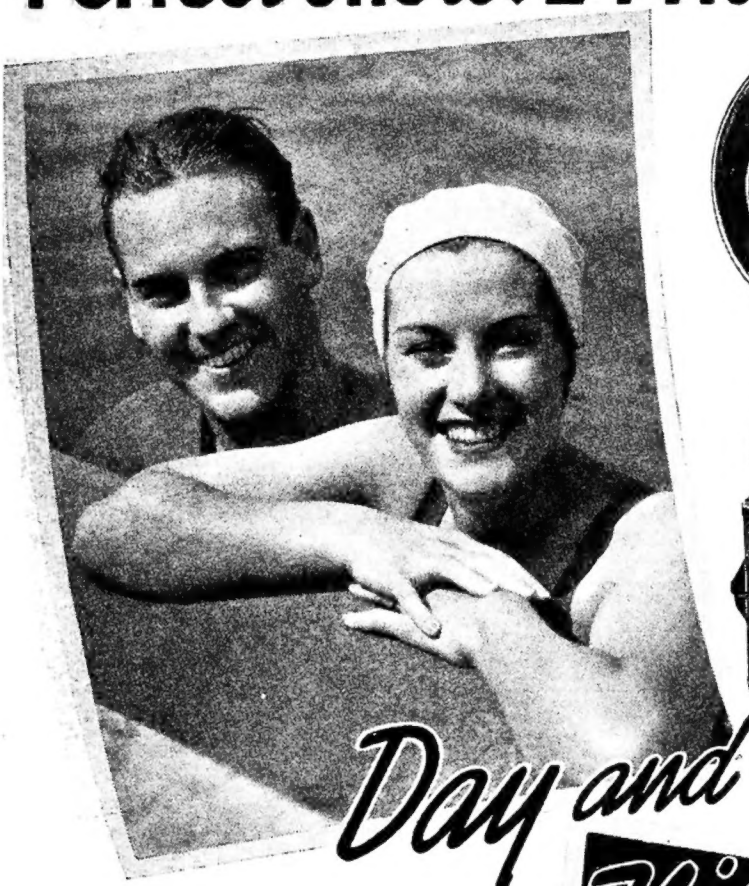

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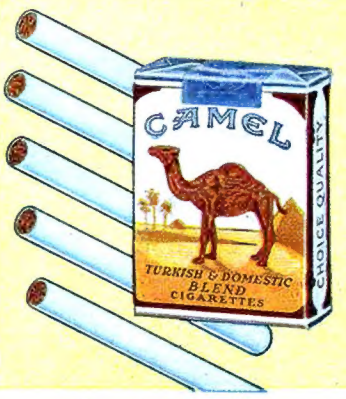

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